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THE BEST SHORT MYSTERY
STORIES OF CHRISTIANNA BRAND



BUFFET FOR UNWELCOME GUESTS

CHRISTIANNA BRAND

EDITED BY FRANCIS M. NEVINS, JR. & MARTIN H. GREENBERG



Buffet for Unwelcome Guests

The Best Short Mysteries of Christianna Brand

Edited by Francis M. Nevins, Jr. & Martin H. Greenberg

Introduction by Robert E. Briney

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Introduction

THE WORLD OF CHRISTIANNA BRAND ROBERT E. BRINEY

THE ORGANIZERS CALLED IT “A Night of Mystery.” It was an evening in late September, 1976, on the campus of the University of California, San Diego. The editorial board of *The Mystery Library*, a mystery fiction reprint project sponsored by the University’s Extension Division, had been meeting on campus for the preceding two days. Board members and guests—writers, editors, and critics of mystery fiction—were now scheduled to present a public program of short talks. Christianna Brand had been one of the guests at the board meeting, and was conscripted for participation in the evening’s entertainment. Preliminary doubts (“What can I find to talk about that would interest an audience?”) were overcome, and proved in the event to have been groundless—as anyone who had sat through the previous two days’ discussions could have predicted. Within two minutes of her arrival at the podium, it was clear that Christianna Brand knew exactly what she was doing, and the audience had joyfully succumbed to her warmth and wit.

Writing about a much later meeting, at the Third International Congress of Crime Writers in Stockholm, 1981, author Barbara

Michaels described Christianna Brand as “a lady whose public persona is a delicious blend of Agatha Christie and Barbara Cartland.”¹ The Christie component can be accepted without argument, but there might be a dispute about including Miss Cartland. And surely just a touch of Gracie Fields ought to be mentioned...

In any case, the scene at the “Night of Mystery” was repeated a few days later at the seventh annual Anthony Boucher Memorial Mystery Convention in Culver City, California. And at the eighth “Bouchercon” in New York a year later, and at the second Mystery Library Writers Conference in the summer of 1978, and on other occasions as well. The topics and anecdotes varied, though some of them had to be reprised by popular demand. (The story of Dorothy L. Sayers and the blood in the stairwell has become a word-of-mouth classic.) But the audience reaction was always the same. Listeners were delighted by the sharp verbal portraits; they listened intently whenever a serious note was introduced; they anticipated exactly as much of a story’s trend as they were intended to do, and responded with appreciative chagrin when the punch line turned out to be other than what they had been induced to expect. In fact, they reacted much as readers of Christianna Brand’s fiction have been doing for some forty years.

Mary Christianna Milne was born on 17 December 1907 in Malaya. She spent a motherless childhood there and in India, supervised by a succession of nannies. Finally she was sent to England to attend a Franciscan convent school in Taunton, Somerset. She adored the school. It was a considerable shock to find, at age seventeen, that her father had lost all his money, and that she was to be turned out to earn her own living. “Vague, bewildered, totally untrained,” as the standard book-jacket biography puts it, she worked without notable success at a long series of jobs: nursery governess, packer of beaded dresses for export, hostess in a plush nightclub, professional ballroom dancer, model in Bond Street dress shops, and (“most hopeless of all”) secretary. She recalls that during these years she was “always broke and often hungry.” Later she ran a club for working girls in a slum section of London, demonstrated gadgets at trade fairs, and made

unsuccessful forays into market gardening and house decorating. Finally she ended up in a shop selling Aga cookers.

It was time for a change in her fortunes, and three things combined to bring one about. The first, despite the lack of any literary or journalistic background, was an impulse to try writing fiction. The result was a very brief crime story called “The Rose,” which was bought by *The Tattler* and published in its October 1939 issue under the byline ‘Mary Brand.’ Already present in this first effort were features that would be characteristic of the author’s fiction through the years: crisp prose, an ironic view of human relationships, and the trick ending which turns a story on its head.

A second influence at this time was the dread and dislike which Mary Milne felt towards a co-worker. Perhaps in an attempt to exorcise this feeling, she decided to write a murder mystery and model one of the characters after the co-worker, who could then be made to suffer a terrible fate by proxy. Accounts differ as to whether the character was to be victim or murderer. At any rate, the novel was begun, scribbled in an exercise book in the shop, in intervals between cooker sales. Before it was finished, a third decisive event occurred. Mary Milne had met and fallen in love with a young surgeon, Roland S. Lewis, and they were married in 1939.

The novel was eventually finished, and began making its rounds. It was turned down by fifteen publishers before being accepted by one of the most prestigious publishing houses in London, The Bodley Head. *Death in High Heels* was duly published in 1941 under the byline ‘Christianna Brand,’ which became the author’s standard pseudonym for her crime fiction. By this time a second mystery novel was well under way, and *Heads You Lose* was also published by The Bodley Head. Although the first Christianna Brand novel would not see a U.S. edition for fourteen years, the second one was not only snapped up for U.S. publication but won a \$1,000

prize in Dodd, Mead's "Red Badge" mystery contest. This novel introduced the author's series character, Inspector Cockrill of the Kent County Police. Small, elderly, bird-like "Cockie" possesses a keen eye for detail, shrewdness in judging character, a sometimes well-concealed sympathy for human frailty, and a fierce passion for the truth. In a character sketch written for Otto Penzler's anthology, *The Great Detectives*, the author reveals that Cockrill was modeled upon her father-in-law, for fifty years a medical practitioner in a small Welsh mining town. "And what does a doctor bring to the study of his patients, but those very qualities that we claim for the chief inspector? Observation, understanding, the ability to cleave through the irrelevant to the right and only diagnosis; a keen appreciation of cause and effect, an ever-increasing experience; integrity, wisdom." Cockrill would eventually appear in five additional novels and (to date) an equal number of short stories.

Before the next book was written, Roland Lewis had gone off to military service overseas, and much of Mary Lewis's time was taken up by war-related work. Written during the German bombardment, under just such conditions as are described in the book, *Green for Danger* is widely regarded as the best Christianna Brand novel. Even to those who propose other candidates, it is an acknowledged classic. A murder is committed in the operating theatre of a military hospital for bombing victims. One of the seven people present must be the murderer, but the murder method and the identity of the guilty party defy Cockrill's efforts at detection until almost too late. Anthony Boucher selected the book for inclusion in a series of reprints called *The World's Great Novels of Detection*, and in his introduction labeled the book a "beautifully deceptive formal detective story," while noting that the passage of twenty years had rendered it also an

excellent period novel. *Green for Danger* was made into an expertly crafted film in 1947, with Alastair Sim in the role of Inspector Cockrill.

In 1946 Mary Lewis made her first departure from the world of mystery fiction. At the urging of the Minister of Health, with whom she was acquainted, she wrote *The Single Pilgrim*, which was published under the byline “Mary Roland.” This novel, quite daring for its time, explored the growing danger of syphilis in postwar Britain.

After the war the careers of both Roland and Mary Lewis stabilized, and finances became more secure. They acquired a Regency house in London’s Maida Vale, with a mulberry tree in the garden. The family had been increased by the adoption of a daughter, named Victoria (Tora) after the heroine of *Death in High Heels*.

Two more Cockrill mysteries appeared, *The Crooked Wreath* in 1946 and *Death of Jezebel* in 1948. During this same period, Christianna Brand wrote the screenplay for a film of *Death in High Heels*, and collaborated on another screenplay, *The Mark of Cain* (1948). A juvenile mystery, *Danger Unlimited*, appeared in the same year. In 1950 she published a romantic suspense novel, *Cat and Mouse*, which was later chosen by Julian Symons for his list of “The Hundred Best Crime Stories” (*The Sunday Times*, London, 1959). In 1952 she collaborated on another screenplay, *Secret People*, and also published one of the best of the Cockrill novels, *London Particular* (U.S. title: *Fog of Doubt*). This novel has contributed to the author’s reputation for technical wizardry, not only on account of the intricate plot but because the final clue in the explanation of the crime is reserved for the last line of the book. (The same trick was used in *The Crooked Wreath*, but less memorably.)

Christianna Brand is, in fact, known for the cleverness of her last lines. But it must be said that these do more than merely give the final twist to the

plot. They often carry an emotional or psychological burden which resonates in the mind long after plot details have faded.

Inspector Cockrill's last book-length appearance was in *Tour de Force* (1955). Here the author exiles the inspector from his beloved England and sends him as an unwilling tourist to the Mediterranean island republic of San Juan el Pirata. Mr. Cecil, the dress designer from *Death in High Heels* (also mentioned briefly in *Green for Danger*), reappears as a member of the tour group. And of course murder is also present, with Cockrill turning out to be the local police inspector's first choice as suspect. *Tour de Force* lived up to its title. It was also, as events proved, in the nature of a valedictory. For a combination of personal and commercial reasons, Christianna Brand wrote no further book-length detective fiction for the next twenty years.

That is not to say that there were no more books during this time. San Juan el Pirata, being too good a creation to abandon after only one novel, was the setting for *The Three-Cornered Halo* in 1957. This is principally a fantasia in the mode of Norman Douglas's *South Wind*, with the mystery element taking a subordinate role. The main character is Harriet Cockrill—"A true sister of my inestimable friend, Inspector Cockrill. Worthy of Scotalanda Yarrda itself," as the Grand Duke says at the end of the book. This was followed by a historical romance, *Starrbelow* (1958), published under the name "China Thompson." Two other historical romances, *Court of Foxes* and *The Radiant Dove* (the latter carrying the byline "Annabel Jones"), appeared in 1969 and 1974, respectively.

In 1960 the author published *Heaven Knows Who*, a thoroughly researched and compellingly written true-crime study of the controversial murder trial of Jessie M'Lachlan in Glasgow in 1862. An anthology of material on the theme of misbehaving children—called, appropriately enough, *Naughty Children*—appeared in 1962, followed two years later by

the first of a trio of children's books about a group of "terribly, terribly naughty" children and the very odd nurse who arrives to keep them in line. The "Nurse Matilda" books remained in print for many years. They are completely delightful, with the text perfectly complemented by the superb drawings of Edward Ardizzone, well known as a painter and book illustrator. Ardizzone, who died in 1979, was Christianna Brand's cousin, and the "Nurse Matilda" books are based on stories which the two of them were told as children.

In the mid-1970s, Christianna Brand returned to book-length mystery fiction, though not to the formal novel of detection in the style of her early successes. In a span of little more than three years there appeared a quartet of varied and satisfying novels. *Alas for Her That Met Me!* (1976), as by "Mary Ann Ashe," is a romantic mystery loosely based on some details of the Madeleine Smith murder case (Glasgow, 1857). *A Ring of Roses* (1977) is a contemporary mystery, in which a group of often weak and sometimes repellent people are brought vividly to life. These two books were published first as paperbacks; the second title was subsequently reprinted in hardcover form. *The Honey Harlot* (1978) is a novel of sexual obsession which is also a reconstruction of the mystery of the *Mary Celeste* (the sailing ship which was found drifting and abandoned in mid-Atlantic in 1872, with no trace of her passengers or crew). And the most recent Christianna Brand novel to date, *The Rose in Darkness* (1979), is as tricky a murder puzzle as the author ever devised, peopled by a group of unconventional but entirely believable characters.

The believability of her characters is one of the hallmarks of Christianna Brand's fiction. Good and bad, mean and generous, clever and dull, the players in her dramas are always fully rounded people whose actions and motivations have a solid foundation. A reviewer once wrote in

the London *Daily Telegraph*, “Miss Brand is not merely a purveyor of thrills or a maker of puzzles. She is a novelist.” It might better have been said that she combines the arts of a novelist with a full measure of thrills and puzzles, and handles all ingredients with the same consummate skill. This skill is just as apparent in her short fiction as it is in her novels. And so we come at last to the offerings now spread before you.

One very important component of Christianna Brand’s career has so far been left out of the discussion. When she ceased writing detective novels in the mid-1950s, part of her attention was turned to the production of short stories. “Aren’t Our Police Wonderful?” appeared in the book *For Love or Money* (1957), an anthology of stories by members of the Mystery Writers of America. “After the Event,” the first short story to feature Inspector Cockrill, appeared during the following year in *Choice of Weapons*, a similar volume by members of Britain’s Crime Writers Association. (Christianna Brand is, of course, a member of both organizations, as well as of the Detection Club.) Stories continued to appear at intervals, both in magazines and in books, though never regularly nor frequently enough to satisfy the growing number of readers for whom the appearance of a new Christianna Brand story was an event. In 1966 *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* sponsored a special short story contest for members of the Crime Writers Association, and the first prize went to Christianna Brand’s “The Hornets’ Nest” (under the title “Twist for Twist”). This story, as psychologically sound, intricate and surprising as any of her novels, was published in the magazine in 1967. A year later it took pride of place as the lead story in *What Dread Hand*, a collection of fifteen of the author’s stories. Although the book has not been published in the United States, most of the stories have appeared here individually, ten of them in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, Miss Brand’s most frequent short story market in the

United States. Six years later another collection appeared, also published only in England: *Brand X* contains eighteen stories (one repeated from the earlier collection), of which fewer than half have been published in the United States. The *Buffet* now being offered contains seven stories from *What Dread Hand* and four from *Brand X*, as well as six stories not previously collected.

It is worth noting that for stories published both in England and in the United States there are sometimes considerable textual differences between the two versions. Among the present group this is most notable in the final paragraphs of “Murder Game.” The version included here is that preferred by the author.

Four of the stories included here feature Inspector Cockrill. Two of them are in a mode not explored in his book-length cases: the “inverted” detective story, in which the reader knows the identity of the guilty party, and may even have been a witness to the event. The suspense lies in just how (or if) the detective will uncover the clues and trap the culprit. Even in this type of story, including one told from the viewpoint of the murderer, the author can play amazing tricks. “*Is the mind quicker than the eye?*” Ellery Queen once asked in connection with one of these stories. When the mind is that of Christianna Brand (or her surrogate, Inspector Cockrill), the answer is not in doubt.

For the rest: there are stories of crime committed, crime concealed, crime revealed by the unpredictable workings of fate; stories of cleverness gone awry, of “the biter bit”; and straightforward (if anything by this author could ever deserve the term) tales of suspense. All are told with economy and style, with a distinctive combination of compassion and ironic detachment—and with that absolutely maddening ability to nourish a clue

before the reader's eyes while simultaneously preventing its significance from being recognized.

Do not, by the way, take the title of this volume too seriously. At this table there *are* no unwelcome guests.

¹“Stakeout in Stockholm: Crime Writers’ Congress,” *The Washington Post*, 19 July 1981.

PART ONE

Cockrill Cocktails

After the Event

‘YES, I THINK I MAY CLAIM,’ said the Grand Old Man (of Detection) complacently, ‘that in all my career I never failed to solve a murder case. In the end,’ he added, hurriedly, having caught Inspector Cockrill’s beady eye.

Inspector Cockrill had for the past hour found himself in the position of the small boy at a party who knows how the conjurer does his tricks. He suggested: ‘The *Othello* case?’ and sat back and twiddled his thumbs.

‘As in the *Othello* case,’ said the Great Detective, as though he had not been interrupted at all. ‘Which, as I say, I solved. In the end,’ he added again, looking defiantly at Inspector Cockrill.

‘But too late?’ suggested Cockie: regretfully.

The great one bowed. ‘In as far as certain evidence had, shall we say?—faded—yes: too late. For the rest, I unmasked the murderer: I built up a water-tight case against him: and I duly saw him triumphantly brought to trial. In other words, I think I may fairly say—that I solved the case.’

‘Only, the jury failed to convict,’ said Inspector Cockrill.

He waved it aside with magnificence. A detail. ‘As it happened, yes; they failed to convict.’

‘And quite right too,’ said Cockie; he was having a splendid time.

‘People round me were remarking, that second time I saw him play *Othello*,’ said the Great Detective, ‘that James Dragon had aged twenty years in as many days. And so he may well have done; for in the past three weeks he had played, night after night, to packed audiences—night after night strangling his new Desdemona, in the knowledge that his own wife had been so strangled but a few days before; and that every man Jack in the

audience believed it was he who had strangled her—believed he was a murderer.’

‘Which, however, he was not,’ said Inspector Cockrill, and his bright elderly eyes shone with malicious glee.

‘Which he was—and was not,’ said the old man heavily. He was something of an actor himself but he had not hitherto encountered the modern craze for audience-participation and he was not enjoying it at all. ‘If I might now be permitted to continue without interruption...?’

‘Some of you may have seen James Dragon on the stage,’ said the old man, ‘though the company all migrated to Hollywood in the end. But none of you will have seen him as Othello—after that season, Dragon Productions dropped it from their repertoire. They were a great theatrical family—still are, come to that, though James and Leila, his sister, are the only ones left nowadays; and as for poor James—getting very *passé*, very *passé* indeed,’ said the Great Detective pityingly, shaking his senile head.

‘But at the time of the murder, he was in his prime; not yet thirty and at the top of his form. And he was splendid. I see him now as I saw him that night, the very night she died—towering over her as she lay on the great stage bed, tricked out in his tremendous costume of black and gold, with the padded chest and shoulders concealing his slenderness and the great padded, jewel-studded sleeves like cantaloupe melons, raised above his head: bringing them down, slowly, slowly, until suddenly he swooped like a hawk and closed his dark-stained hands on her white throat. And I hear again Emilia’s heartbreak cry in the lovely Dragon family voice: “Oh, thou hast killed the sweetest innocent, That e’er did lift up eye...” ’

But she had not been an innocent—James Dragon’s Desdemona, Glenda Croy, who was in fact his wife. She had been a thoroughly nasty piece of work. An aspiring young actress, she had blackmailed him into

marriage for the sake of her career; and that had been all of a piece with her conduct throughout. A great theatrical family was extremely sensitive to blackmail even in those more easy-going days of the late nineteen-twenties; and in the first rush of the Dragons' spectacular rise to fame, there had been one or two unfortunate episodes, one of them even culminating in a—very short—prison sentence: which, however, had effectively been hushed up. By the time of the murder, the Dragons were a byword for a sort of magnificent untouchability. Glenda Croy, without ever unearthing more than a grubby little scandal here and there, could yet be the means of dragging them all back into the mud again.

James Dragon had been, in the classic manner, born—at the turn of the century—backstage of a provincial theatre: had lustily wailed from his property basket while Romeo whispered through the mazes of Juliet's ball-dance, 'Just before curtain-up. Both doing splendidly. It's a boy!'; had been carried on at the age of three weeks, and at the age often formed with his sister such a precious pair of prodigies that the parents gave up their own promising careers to devote themselves to the management of their children's affairs. By the time he married, Dragon Productions had three touring companies always on the road and a regular London Shakespeare season, with James Dragon and Leila, his sister, playing the leads. Till he married a wife.

From the day of his marriage, Glenda took over the leads. They fought against it, all of them, the family, the whole company, James himself: but Glenda used her blackmail with subtlety, little hints here, little threats there, and they were none of them proof against it—James Dragon was their 'draw', with him they all stood or fell. So Leila stepped back and accepted second leads and for the good of them all, Arthur Dragon, the father, who produced for the company as well as being its manager did his honest best

with the new recruit: and so got her through her Juliet (to a frankly mature Romeo), her Lady Macbeth, her Desdemona; and at the time of her death was breaking his heart rehearsing her Rosalind, preparatory to the company's first American tour.

Rosalind was Leila Dragon's pet part. 'But, Dad, she's hopeless, we *can't* have her prancing her way across America grinning like a coy hyena: do speak to James again...'

'James can't do anything, my dear.'

'Surely by this time... It's three years now, we were all so certain it wouldn't last a year.'

'She knows where her bread is buttered,' said the lady's father-in-law, sourly.

'But now, having played with *us*—she could strike out on her own?'

'Why should she want to? With us, she's safe—and she automatically plays our leads.'

'If only she'd fall for some man...'

'She won't do that; she's far too canny,' said Arthur Dragon. 'That would be playing into our hands. And she's interested in nothing but getting on; she doesn't bother with men.' And, oddly enough, after a pass or two, men did not bother with her.

A row blew up over the Rosalind part, which rose to its climax before the curtain went up on '*Venice. A Street*', on the night that Glenda Croy died. It rumbled through odd moments offstage, and through the intervals, spilled over into hissed asides between Will Shakespeare's lines, and culminated in a threat spat out with the venom of a viper as she lay on the bed, with the great arms raised above her, ready to pounce and close hands about her throat. Something about 'gaol'. Something about 'prisoners'. Something about the American tour.

It was an angry and a badly frightened man who faced her, twenty minutes later, in her dressing-room. ‘What did you mean, Glenda, by what you said on-stage?—during the death scene. Gaolbirds, prisoners—what did you mean, what was it you said?’

She had thrown on a dressing-gown at his knock and now sat calmly on the divan, peeling off her stage stockings. ‘I meant that I am playing Rosalind in America. Or the company is not going to America.’

‘I don’t see the connection,’ he said.

‘You will,’ said Glenda.

‘But, Glenda, be sensible, Rosalind just isn’t your part.’

‘No,’ said Glenda. ‘It’s dear Leila’s part. But I am playing Rosalind—or the company is not going to America.’

‘Don’t *you* want to go to America?’

‘I can go any day I like. You can’t. Without me, Dragon Productions stay home.’

‘I have accepted the American offer,’ he said steadily. ‘I am taking the company out. Come if you like—playing Celia.’

She took off one stocking and tossed it over her shoulder, bent to slide the other down, over a round white knee. ‘No one is welcomed into America who has been a gaolbird.’ she said.

‘Oh—that’s it?’ he said. ‘Well, if you mean me...’ But he wavered. ‘There was a bit of nonsense... Good God, it was years ago... And anyway, it was all rubbish, a bit of bravado, we were all wild and silly in those days before the war...’

‘Explain all that to the Americans,’ she said.

‘I’ve no doubt I’d be able to,’ he said, still steadily. ‘If they ever found out, which I doubt they ever would.’ But his mind swung round on itself. ‘This is a new—mischief—of yours, Glenda. How did you find it out?’

‘I came across a newspaper cutting.’ She gave a sort of involuntary glance back over her shoulder; it told him without words spoken that the paper was here in the room. He caught at her wrist. ‘Give that cutting to me!’

She did not even struggle to free her hand; just sat looking up at him with her insolent little smile. She was sure of herself. ‘Help yourself. It’s in my handbag. But the information’s still at the newspaper office, you know—and here in my head, facts, dates, all the rest of it. Plus any little embellishments I may care to add.’ He relaxed his grip and she freed her hand without effort and sat gently massaging the wrist. ‘It’s wonderful,’ she said, ‘what lies people will believe, if you base them on a hard core of truth.’

He called her a filthy name and, standing there, blind with his mounting disgust and fury, added filth to filth. She struck out at him then like a wild cat, slapping him violently across the face with the flat of her hand. At the sharp sting of the slap, his control gave way. He raised his arms above his head and brought them down—slowly, slowly with a menace infinitely terrible: and closed his hands about her throat and shook her like a rag doll—and flung her back on to the bed and started across the room in search of the paper. It was in her handbag as she had said. He took it and stuffed it into his pocket and went back and stood triumphantly over her.

And saw that she was dead.

‘I had gone, as it happened, to a restaurant just across the street from the theatre,’ said the Great Detective; ‘and they got me there. She was lying on the couch, her arms flung over her head, the backs of her hands with their pointed nails brushing the floor; much as I had seen her, earlier in the evening, lying in a pretence of death. But she no longer wore Desdemona’s

elaborate robes, she wore only the rather solid undies of those days, cami-knickers and a petticoat, under a silk dressing-gown. She seemed to have put up very little struggle: though there was a red mark round her right wrist and a faint pink stain across the palm of her hand.

‘Most of the company and the technicians I left for the moment to my assistants, and they proved later to have nothing of interest to tell us. The stage door-keeper, however, an ancient retired actor, testified to having seen ‘shadows against her lighted windows. Mr. James was in there with her. They were going through the strangling scene. Then the light went out: that’s all I know.’

‘How did you know it was Mr. Dragon in there?’

‘Well, they were rehearsing the strangling scene,’ the door-keeper repeated, reasonably.

‘Now, however, you realise that she really was being strangled?’

‘Well, yes.’ He looked troubled. The Dragon family in their affluence were good to old theatricals like himself.

‘Very well. Can you now say that you know it was Mr. Dragon?’

‘I thought it was. You see, he was speaking the lines.’

‘You mean, you heard his voice? You heard what he was saying?’

‘A word here and there. He raised his voice—just as he does on those lines in the production: the death lines, you know...’ He looked hopeful. ‘So it *was* just a run-through.’

‘They were all sitting in what, I suppose, would be the Green-room: James Dragon himself, his father who, besides producing, played the small part of Othello’s servant, the Clown; his mother who was wardrobe mistress, etcetera and had some little walking-on part, Leila Dragon who played Emilia, and three actors (who, for a wonder, weren’t members of the family), playing respectively, Iago, Cassio and Cassio’s mistress, Bianca. I

think,’ said the Great Detective, beaming round the circle of eagerly listening faces, ‘that it will be less muddling to refer to them by their stage names.’

‘Do you really?’ asked Inspector Cockrill: incredulous.

‘Do I really what?’

‘Think it will be less muddling?’ said Cockie: and twiddled his thumbs again.

The great man ignored him. ‘They were in stage make-up, still, and in stage costume: and they sat about or stood, in attitudes of horror, grief, dismay or despair, which seemed to me very much like stage attitudes too.

‘They gave me their story—I use the expression advisedly as you will see—of the past half-hour.

‘The leading-lady’s dressing-room at the Dragon Theatre juts out from the main building, so angled, as it happens, that the windows can be seen from the Green-room, as they can from the door-keeper’s cubby. As I talked, I myself could see my men moving about in there, silhouettes against the drawn blinds.

‘They had been gathered, they said, the seven of them, here in the Green-room, for twenty minutes after the curtain came down—Othello, Othello’s servant the Clown, Emilia and Mrs. Dragon (the family) plus Iago, Cassio and a young girl playing Bianca; all discussing “something”. During the time, they said, nobody had left the room. Their eyes shifted to James Dragon and shifted away again.

‘He seemed to feel the need to say something, anything to distract attention from that involuntary, shifting glance. He blurted out: “And if you want to know what we were discussing, we were discussing my wife.”

‘ “She had been Carrying On,” said Mrs. Dragon in a voice of theatrical doom.

‘ “She had for some time been carrying on a love affair, as my mother says. We were afraid the affair would develop, would get out of hand, that she wouldn’t want to come away on our American tour and it would upset our arrangements. We were taking out *As You Like It*. She was to have played Rosalind.”

‘ “And then?”

‘ “We heard footsteps along the corridor. Someone knocked at her door. We thought nothing of it till one of us glanced up and saw the shadows on her blind. There was a man with her in there. We supposed it was the lover.”

‘ “Who was this lover?” I asked. If such a man existed, I had better send out after him, on the offchance.

‘But none of them, they said, knew who he was. “She was too clever for that,” said Mrs. Dragon in her tragedy voice.

‘ “How could he have got into the theatre? The stage door-man didn’t see him.”

‘They did not know. No doubt there might have been some earlier arrangement between them...

‘And not the only “arrangement” that had been come to that night. They began a sort of point counterpoint recital which I could have sworn had been rehearsed. *Iago* (or it may have been *Cassio*): “Then we saw that they were quarrelling...” *Emilia*: “To our great satisfaction!” *Clown*: “That would have solved all our problems, you see.” *Othello*: “Not all our problems. It would not have solved mine.” *Emilia*, quoting: “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, Made to write ‘whore’ upon...?” *Mrs. Dragon*: “Leila, James, be careful” (sotto voce, and glancing at me). *Clown*, hastily as though to cover up: “And then, sir, he seemed to pounce down upon her as far as, from the distorted shadows, we could see. A moment

later he moved across the room and then suddenly the lights went out and we heard the sound of a window violently thrown up. My son, James, came to his senses first. He rushed out and we saw the lights come on again. We followed him. He was bending over her...”

‘ “She was dead,” said James; and struck an attitude against the Green-room mantelpiece, his dark-stained face heavy with grief, resting his forehead on his dark-stained hand. People said later, as I’ve told you, that he aged twenty years in as many days; I remember thinking at the time in fact he had aged twenty years in as many minutes: and that that was *not* an act.

‘A window had been found swinging open, giving on to a narrow lane behind the theatre. I did not need to ask how the lover was supposed to have made his get-away. “And all this time,” I said, “none of you left the Green-room?”

‘ “No one,” they repeated: and this time were careful not to glance at James.

‘You must appreciate,’ said the Great Detective, pouring himself another glass of port, ‘that I did not then know all I have explained to you. If I was to believe what I was told, I knew only this: that the door-keeper had seen a man strangling the woman, repeating the words of the Othello death-scene—which, however, amount largely to calling the lady a strumpet; that apparently the lady was a strumpet, in as far as she had been entertaining a lover; and that six people, of whom three were merely members of his company, agreed that they had seen the murder committed while James Dragon was sitting innocently in the room with them. I had to take the story of the lover at its face value: I could not then know, as I knew later, that Glenda Croy had avoided such entanglements. But it raised, nevertheless, certain questions in my mind.’ It was his custom to pause at

this moment, smiling benignly round on his audience, and invite them to guess what those questions had been.

No one seemed very ready with suggestions. He was relaxing complacently in his chair, as also was his custom for no one ever did offer suggestions, when, having civilly waited for the laymen to speak first, Inspector Cockrill raised his unwelcome voice. 'You reflected no doubt that the lover was really rather too good to be true. A "murderer", seen by seven highly interested parties and by nobody else: whose existence, however, could never be disproved; and who was so designed as to throw no shadow of guilt on to any real man.'

'It is always easy to be wise after the event,' said the old man huffily. Even that, however, Inspector Cockrill audibly took leave to doubt. Their host asked somewhat hastily what the great man had done next. The great man replied gloomily that since his fellow guest, Inspector Cockrill, seemed so full of ideas, perhaps he had better say what *he* would have done.

'Sent for the door-keeper and checked the stories together,' said Cockie promptly.

This was (to his present chagrin) precisely what the Great Detective had done. The stories, however, had proved to coincide pretty exactly, to the moment when the light had gone out. 'Then I heard footsteps from the direction of the Green-room, sir. About twenty minutes later, you arrived. That's the first I knew she was dead.'

So: what to do next?

'To ask oneself,' said Inspector Cockrill, though the question had been clearly rhetorical, 'why there had been fifteen minutes' delay in sending for the police.'

'Why should you think there had been fifteen minutes' delay?'

‘The man said it was twenty minutes before you arrived. But you told us earlier, you were just across the street.’

‘No doubt,’ said the old man, crossly, ‘as you have guessed my question, you would like to—’

‘Answer it,’ finished Inspector Cockrill. ‘Yes, certainly. The answer is: because the cast wanted time to change back into stage costume. We know they had changed out of it, or at least begun to change...’

‘I knew it: the ladies were not properly laced up, Iago had on an everyday shirt under his doublet—they had all obviously hurriedly redressed and as hurriedly re-made up. But how could you...?’

‘We could deduce it. Glenda Croy had had time to get back into her underclothes. The rest of them said they had been in the Green-room discussing the threat of her “affair”. But the affair had been going on for some time, it couldn’t have been suddenly so pressing that they need discuss it before they even got out of their stage-costume—which is, I take it, by instinct and training the first thing an actor does after curtain-fall. And besides, you *knew* that Othello, at least, had changed and changed back.’

‘I knew?’

‘You believed it was Othello—that’s to say James Dragon—who had been in the room with her. And the door-man had virtually told you that at that time he was not wearing his stage costume.’

‘I fear then that till this moment,’ said the great man, heavily sarcastic, ‘the door-man’s statement to that effect has escaped me.’

‘Well, but...’ Cockie was astonished. ‘You asked him how, having seen his silhouette on the window-blinds, he had “known” it was James Dragon. And he answered, after reflection, that he knew by his voice and by what he was saying. He did not say,’ said Cockie, sweetly reasonable, ‘what otherwise, surely, he would have said before all else: “I knew by the shape

on the window-blind of the raised arms in those huge, padded, cantaloupe-melon sleeves.” ’

There was a horrid little silence. The host started the port on its round again with a positive whizz, the guests pressed walnuts upon one another with abandon (hoarding the nut-crackers, however, to themselves); and, after all, it was a shame to be pulling the white rabbits all at once out of the conjurer’s top hat, before he had come to them—if he ever got there! Inspector Cockrill tuned his voice to a winning respect. ‘So then, do tell us, sir—what next did you do?’

What the great man had done, standing there in the Green-room muttering to himself, had been to conduct a hurried review of the relevant times, in his own mind. ‘Ten-thirty, the curtain falls. Ten-fifty, having changed from their stage dress, they do or do not meet in here for a council of war. At any rate, by eleven o’clock the woman is dead: and then there is a council of war indeed... Ten minutes, perhaps, for frantic discussion, five or ten minutes’ grace before they must all be in costume again, ready to receive the police...’ But *why*? His eyes roved over them: the silks and velvets, the rounded bosoms thrust up by laced bodices, low cut: the tight-stretched hose, the jewelled doublets, the melon sleeves...

The sleeves. He remembered the laxly curved hands hanging over the head of the divan, the pointed nails. There had been no evidence of a struggle, but one never knew. He said slowly: ‘May I ask now why all of you have replaced your stage dress and make-up?’

Was there, somewhere in the room, a sharp intake of breath? Perhaps: but for the most part they retained their stagey calm. Emilia and Iago, point counterpoint, again explained. They had all been halfway, as it were, between stage dress and day dress; it had been somehow simpler to scramble back into costume when the alarm arose... Apart from the effect

of an act rehearsed, it rang with casual truth. ‘Except that you told me that “when the alarm arose” you were all here in the Green-room, having a discussion.’

‘Yes, but only half-changed, changing as we talked,’ said Cassio, quickly. Stage people, he added, were not frightfully fussy about the conventional modesties.

‘Very well. You will, however, oblige me by reverting to day dress now. But before you all do so...’ He put his head out into the corridor and a couple of men moved in unobtrusively and stood just inside the door. ‘Mr. James Dragon—would you please remove those sleeves and let me see your wrists?’

It was the girl, Bianca, who cried out—on a note of terror: ‘No!’

‘Hush, be quiet,’ said James Dragon: commandingly but soothingly.

‘But James... But James, he thinks... It isn’t true,’ she cried out frantically, ‘it was the other man, we saw him in there, Mr. Dragon was in here with us...’

‘Then Mr. Dragon will have no objection to showing me his arms.’

‘But why?’ she cried out, violently. ‘How could his arms be...? He had that costume on, he did have it on, he was wearing it at the very moment he...’ There was a sharp hiss from someone in the room and she stopped, appalled, her hand across her mouth. But she rushed on. ‘He hasn’t changed, he’s had on that costume, those sleeves, all the time: nothing could have happened to his wrists. Haven’t you, James?—hasn’t he, everyone?—we know, we all saw him, he was wearing it when he came back...’

There was that hiss of thrilled horror again: but Leila Dragon said, quickly, ‘When he came back from finding the body, she means,’ and went across and took the girl roughly by the arm. The girl opened her mouth and gave one piercing scream like the whistle of a train; and suddenly, losing

control of herself, Leila Dragon slapped her once and once again across the face.

The effect was extraordinary. The scream broke short, petered out into a sort of yelp of terrified astonishment. Mrs. Dragon cried out sharply, ‘Oh, no!’ and James Dragon said, ‘Leila, you *fool!*’ They all stood staring, utterly in dismay. And Leila Dragon blurted out: ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. It was because she screamed. It was—a sort of reaction, instinctive, a sort of reaction to hysteria...’ She seemed to plead with them. It was curious that she seemed to plead with them, and not with the girl.

James Dragon broke through the ice-wall of their dismay. He said uncertainly: ‘It’s just that... We don’t want to make—well, enemies of people,’ and the girl broke out wildly: ‘How dare you touch me? How dare you?’

It was as though an act which for a moment had broken down, reduced the cast to gagging, now received a cue from prompt corner and got going again. Leila Dragon said, ‘You were hysterical, you were losing control.’

‘How dare you?’ screamed the girl. Her pretty face was waspish with spiteful rage. ‘All I’ve done is to try to protect him, like the rest of you...’

‘Be quiet,’ said Mrs. Dragon, in *The Voice*.

‘Let her say what she has to say,’ the detective said. She was silent. ‘Come now. “He was wearing it when he came back”—the Othello costume. “*When he came back.*” From finding the body, Miss Leila Dragon now says. But he didn’t “come back”. You all followed him to the dressing-room—you said so.’

She remained silent, however; and he could deal with her later—time was passing, clues were growing cold. ‘Very well then, Mr. Dragon, let us get on with it. I want to see your wrists and arms.’

‘But why me?’ said James Dragon, almost petulantly; and once again there was that strange effect of an unreal act being staged for some set purpose: and once again the stark reality of a face grown all in a moment haggard and old beneath the dark stain of the Moor.

‘It’s not only you. I may come to the rest, in good time.’

‘But me first?’

‘Get on with it, please,’ he said impatiently.

But when at last, fighting every inch of the way, with an ill grace he slowly divested himself of the great sleeves—there was nothing to be seen: nothing but a brown-stained hand whose colour ended abruptly at the wrist, giving place to forearms startlingly white against the brown—but innocent of scratches or marks of any kind.

‘Nor did Iago, I may add in passing, nor did Cassio nor the Clown nor anyone else in the room, have marks of any kind on wrists or arms. So there I was—five minutes wasted and nothing to show for it.’

‘Well hardly,’ said Inspector Cockrill, passing walnuts to his neighbour.

‘I beg your pardon? Did Mr. Cockrill say something again?’

‘I just murmured that there was after all, something to show for it—for the five minutes wasted.’

‘?’

‘Five minutes wasted,’ said Inspector Cockrill.

Five minutes wasted. Yes. They had been working for it, they were playing for time. Waiting for something. Or postponing something? ‘And of course, meanwhile, there had been the scene with the girl,’ said Cockie. ‘That wasn’t a waste of time. That told you a lot. I mean—losing control and screaming out that he had been wearing Othello’s costume “at the very moment...” and, “when he came back”. “Losing control”—and yet what

she screamed out contained at least one careful lie. Because he hadn't been wearing the costume—that we know for certain.' And he added inconsequently that they had to remember all the time that these were acting folk.

But that had not been the end of the scene with the girl. As he perfunctorily examined her arms—for surely no woman had had any part in the murder—she had whispered to him that she wanted to speak to him: outside. And, darting looks of poison at them, holding her hand to her slapped face, she had gone out with him to the corridor. 'I stood with her there while she talked,' said the old man. 'Her face, of course, was heavily made up; and yet under the make-up I could see the weal where Leila Dragon had slapped her. She was not hysterical now, she was cool and clear; but she was afraid and for the first time it seemed to be not at all an act, she seemed to be genuinely afraid, and afraid at what she was about to say to me. But she said it. It was a—solution: a suggestion of how the crime had been done; though she unsaid nothing that she had already said. I went back into the Green-room. They were all standing about, white-faced, looking at her as she followed me in; and with them, also, there seemed to be an air of genuine horror, genuine dread, as though the need for histrionics had passed. Leila Dragon was holding the wrist of her right hand in her left. I said to James Dragon: "I think at this stage it would be best if you would come down to the station with me, for further questioning..."

'I expected an uproar and there was an uproar. More waste of time. But now, you see,' said the old man, looking cunningly round the table, 'I knew—didn't I? Waiting for something? Or postponing something? Now, you see, I knew.'

'At any rate, you took him down to the station?' said Cockie, sickened by all this gratuitous mystifying. 'On the strength of what the girl had

suggested?’

‘What that was is, of course, quite clear to *you*?’

‘Well, of course,’ said Cockie.

‘Of course, of course,’ said the old man angrily. He shrugged. ‘At any rate—it served as an excuse. It meant that I could take him, and probably hold him there, on a reasonable suspicion: it did him out of the alibi, you see. So off he went, at last, with a couple of my men; and, after a moment, I followed. But before I went, I collected something—something from his dressing-room.’ Another of his moments had come; but this time he addressed himself only to Inspector Cockrill. ‘No doubt what that was is also clear to you?’

‘Well, a pot of theatrical cleansing cream, I suppose,’ said Inspector Cockrill; almost apologetically.

The old man, as has been said, was something of an actor himself. He affected to give up. ‘As you know it so well, Inspector, you had better explain to our audience and save me my breath.’ He gave to the words ‘our audience’ an ironic significance quite shattering in its effect; and hugged to himself a secret white rabbit to be sprung, to the undoing of this tiresome little man, when all seemed over, out of a secret top hat.

Inspector Cockrill in his turn affected surprise, affected diffidence, affected reluctant acceptance. ‘Oh, well, all right.’ He embarked upon it in his grumbling voice. ‘It was the slap across the girl, Bianca’s, face. Our friend, no doubt, will tell you that he paid very little attention to whatever it was she said to him in the corridor.’ (A little more attention, he privately reflected, would have been to advantage; but still...) ‘He was looking, instead, at the weal on her face: glancing in through the door, perhaps, to where Leila Dragon sat unconsciously clasping her stinging right hand with her left. He was thinking of another hand he had recently seen, with a pink

mark across the palm. He knew now, as he says. He knew why they had been so appalled when, forgetting herself, she had slapped the girl's face: because it might suggest to his mind that there had been another such incident that night. He knew. He knew what they all had been waiting for, why they had been marking time. He knew why they had scrambled back into stage costume, they had done it so that there might be no particularity if James Dragon appeared in the dark make-up of Othello the Moor. They were waiting till under the stain, another stain should fade—the mark of Glenda Croy's hand across her murderer's cheek.' He looked into the Great Detective's face. 'I think that's the way your mind worked?'

The great one bowed. 'Very neatly thought out. Very creditable.' He shrugged. 'Yes, that's how it was. So we took him down to the station and without more delay we cleaned the dark paint off his face. And under the stain—what do you think we found?'

'Nothing,' said Inspector Cockrill.

'Exactly,' said the old man, crossly.

'You can't have found anything; because, after all, he was free to play Othello for the next three weeks,' said Cockie, simply. 'You couldn't detain him—there was nothing to detain him on. The girl's story wasn't enough to stand alone, without the mark of the slap: and now, if it had ever been there, it had faded. Their delaying tactics had worked. You had to let him go.'

'For the time being,' said the old man. The rabbit had poked its ears above the rim of the hat and he poked them down again. 'You no doubt will equally recall that at the end of three weeks, James Dragon was arrested and duly came up for trial?' Hand over hat, keeping the rabbit down, he gave his adversary a jab. 'What do you suggest, sir, happened in the meantime?—to bring that change about.'

Inspector Cockrill considered, his splendid head bowed over a couple of walnuts which he was trying to crack together. 'I can only suggest that what happened, sir, was that you went to the theatre.'

'To the theatre?'

'Well, to The Theatre,' said Cockie. 'To the Dragon Theatre. And there, for the second time, saw James Dragon play Othello.'

'A great performance. A great performance,' said the old man, uneasily. The rabbit had poked his whole head over the brim of the hat and was winking at the audience.

'Was it?' said Cockie. 'The first time you saw him—yes. But that second time? I mean, you were telling us that people all around you were saying how much he had aged.' But he stopped. 'I beg your pardon, sir: I keep forgetting that this is your story.'

It had been the old man's story—for years it had been his best story, the pet white rabbit out of the conjurer's mystery hat; and now it was spoilt by the horrid little boy who knew how the tricks were done. 'That's all there is to it,' he said sulkily. 'She made this threat about exposing the prison sentence—as we learned later on. They all went back to their dressing-rooms and changed into every-day things. James Dragon, as soon as he was dressed, went round to his wife's room. Five minutes later, he assembled his principals in the Greenroom: Glenda Croy was dead and he bore across his face the mark where she had hit him, just before she died.

'They were all in it together; with James Dragon, the company stood or fell. They agreed to protect him. They knew that from where he sat the door-keeper might well have seen the shadow-show on her dressing-room blinds, perhaps even the blow across the face. They knew that James Dragon must come under immediate suspicion; they knew that at all costs

they must prevent anyone from seeing the mark of the blow. They could not estimate how long it would take for the mark to fade.

‘You know what they did. They scrambled back into costume again, they made up their faces—and beneath the thick greasepaint they buried the fatal mark. I arrived. There was nothing for it now but to play for time.

‘They played for time. They built up the story of the lover—who, in fact, eventually bore the burden of guilt, for as you know, no one was ever convicted: and he could never be disproved. But still only a few minutes had passed and now I was asking them to change back into day dress. James created a further delay in refusing to have his arms examined. Another few moments gone by. They gave the signal to the girl to go into her pre-arranged act.’

He thought back across the long years. ‘It was a very good act: she’s done well since but I don’t suppose she ever excelled the act she put on that night. But she was battling against hopeless odds, poor girl. You see—I did know one thing by then; didn’t I?’

‘You knew they were playing for time,’ said Inspector Cockrill. ‘Or why should James Dragon have refused to show you his arms? There was nothing incriminating about his arms.’

‘Exactly: and so—I was wary of her. But she put up a good performance. It was easier for her, because of course by now she was really afraid: they were all afraid—afraid lest this desperate last step they were taking in their delaying action should prove to have been a step too far: lest they found their “solution” was so good that they could not go back on it.’

‘This solution, however, of course you had already considered and dismissed?’

‘Mr. Cockrill, no doubt, will be delighted to tell you what the solution was.’

‘If you like,’ said Mr. Cockrill. ‘But it *could* be only the one “solution”, couldn’t it? Especially as you said that she stuck to what she’d earlier said. She’d given him an alibi—they’d all given him an alibi—for the time up to the moment the light went out. She dragged you out into the corridor and she said...’

‘She said?’

‘Well, nothing new,’ said Cockie. ‘She just—repeated, only with a special significance, something that someone else had said.’

‘The Clown, yes.’

‘When he was describing what they were supposed to have seen against the lighted blinds. He said that they saw the man pounce down upon the woman: that the light went out and they heard the noise of the window being thrown up. That James, his son, rushed out and that when they followed, he was bending over her. I suppose the girl repeated with direful significance: “*He was bending over her.*” ’

‘A ridiculous implication, of course.’

‘Of course,’ said Inspector Cockrill, readily. ‘If, which I suppose was her proposition, the pounce had been a pounce of love, followed by an extinction of the lights, it seemed hardly likely that the gentleman concerned would immediately leave the lady and bound out of the nearest window—since she was reputedly complacent. But supposing that he had, supposing that the infuriated husband, rushing in and finding her thus deserted, had bent over and impulsively strangled her where, disappointed, she reclined—it is even less likely that his own father would have been the first to draw your attention to the fact. Why mention, “he was bending over her”?’

‘Precisely, excellent,’ said the old man: kindly patronization was the only card left in the conjurer’s hand.

‘Her story had the desired effect, however?’

‘It created further delay, before I demanded that they remove their make-up. It was beyond their dreams that I should create even more, myself, by taking James Dragon to the police station.’

‘You were justified,’ said Cockie, indulging in a little kindly patronization on his own account. ‘Believing what you did. And having received that broad hint—which they certainly had never intended to give you—when Leila Dragon lost her head and slapped Bianca’s face...’

‘And then sat unconsciously holding her stinging hand.’

‘So you’d almost decided to have him charged. But it would be most convenient to do the whole thing tidily down at the station, cleaning him up and all...’

‘We weren’t a set of actor-fellows down there,’ said the old man defensively, though no one had accused him of anything. ‘We cleaned away the greasepaint enough to see that there was no mark of the blow. But I dare say we left him to do the rest—and I dare say he saw to it that a lot remained about the forehead and eyes... I remember thinking that he looked old and haggard, but under the circumstances that would not be surprising. And when at last I got back to the theatre, no doubt the same thing went on with “Arthur” Dragon; perhaps I registered that he looked young for his years—but I have forgotten that.’ He sighed. ‘By then, of course, anyway, it was too late. The mark was gone.’ He sighed again. ‘A man of thirty with a red mark to conceal: and a man of fifty. The family likeness, the famous voice, both actors, both familiar with Othello, since the father had produced it: and both with perhaps the most effective disguises that fate could possibly have designed for them...’

‘The Moor of Venice,’ said Inspector Cockrill.

‘And—a Clown,’ said the Great Detective. The white rabbit leapt out of the hat and bowed right and left to the audience.

‘Whether, as I say, he continued to play his son’s part—on the stage as well as off,’ said the Great Detective, ‘I shall never know. But I think he did. I think they would hardly dare to change back before my very eyes. I think that, backed up by a loyal company, they played Cox and Box with me. I said to you earlier that while his audiences believed their Othello to be in fact a murderer—he was: and he was not. I think that Othello was a murderer; but I think that the wrong man was playing Othello’s part.’

‘And you,’ said Inspector Cockrill, in a voice hushed with what doubtless was reverence, ‘went to see him play?’

‘And heard someone say that he seemed to have aged twenty years... And so,’ said the Great Detective, ‘we brought him to trial, as you know. We had a case all right: the business about the prison sentence, of course, came to light; we did much to discredit the existence of any lover; we had the evidence of the stage door-keeper, the evidence of the company was not disinterested. But alas!—the one tangible clue, the mark of that slap, had long since gone: and there we were. I unmasked him; I built up a case against him: I brought him to trial. The jury failed to convict.’

‘And quite right too,’ said Inspector Cockrill.

‘And quite right too,’ agreed the great man graciously. ‘A British jury is always right. Lack of concrete evidence, lack of unbiased witnesses, lack of demonstrable proof...’

‘Lack of a murderer,’ said Inspector Cockrill.

‘Are you suggesting,’ said the old man, after a little while, ‘that Arthur Dragon did not impersonate his son? And if so—will you permit me to ask, my dear fellow, who then impersonated who? Leila Dragon, perhaps, took her brother’s place? She had personal grudges against Glenda Croy. And

she was tall and well-built (the perfect Rosalind—a clue, my dear Inspector, after your own heart!) and he was slight, for a man. And of course she had the famous Dragon voice.'

'She also had a "well-rounded bosom",' said Inspector Cockrill, 'exposed, as you told us, by laced bodice and low-cut gown. She might have taken her brother's part: he can hardly have taken hers.' And he asked, struggling with the two walnuts, why anybody should have impersonated anybody, anyway.

'But they were... But they all... But everything they said or did was designed to draw attention to Othello, was designed to gain time while the mark was fading under the make-up of—'

'Of the Clown,' said Inspector Cockrill: and his voice was as sharp as the crack of the walnuts suddenly giving way between his hard brown hands.

'It was indeed,' said Inspector Cockrill, ' "a frightened and angry man" who rushed round to her dressing-room that night: after his son had told him of the threat hissed out on the stage. "Something about gaol.... Something about prisoners..." ' He said to the old man: 'You did not make it clear that it was *Arthur* Dragon who had served a prison sentence, all those years ago.'

'Didn't I?' said the old man. 'Well, it made no difference. James Dragon was their star and their "draw", Arthur Dragon was their manager—without either, the company couldn't undertake the tour. But of course it was Arthur: who on earth could have thought otherwise?'

'No one,' agreed Cockie. 'He said as much to her in the dressing-room. "If you're referring to me..." and, "We were all wild and silly in those days before the war..." That was the 1914 war, of course: all this happened thirty years ago. But in the days before the 1914 war, James Dragon would have

been a child: he was born at the turn of the century—far too young to be sent to prison, anyway.

‘You would keep referring to these people by their stage names,’ said Cockie. ‘It was muddling. We came to think of the Clown as the Clown, and not as Arthur Dragon, James Dragon’s father—and manager and producer for Dragon Productions. “I am taking the company to America...” It was not for James Dragon to say that; he was their star, but his father was their manager, it was he who “took” the company here or there... And, “You can come if you like—playing Celia.” It was not for James Dragon to say that: it was for Arthur Dragon, their producer, to assign the parts to the company...

‘It was the dressing-gown, I think, that started me off on it,’ said Inspector Cockrill, thoughtfully. ‘You see—as one of them said, the profession is not fussy about the conventional modesties. Would Glenda Croy’s husband really have knocked?—rushing in there, mad with rage and anxiety, would he really have paused to knock politely at his wife’s door? And she—would she really have waited to put on a dressing-gown over her ample petticoat, to receive him? For her father-in-law, perhaps, yes: we are speaking of many years ago. But for her husband...? Well, I wouldn’t know. But it started me wondering.

‘At any rate—he killed her. She could break up their tour, she could throw mud at their great name: and he had everything to lose, an ageing actor who had given up his own career for the company. He killed her; and a devoted family and loyal, and “not disinterested” company, hatched up a plot to save him from the consequences of what none of them greatly deplored. We made our mistake, I think,’ said Cockie, handsomely including himself in the mistake, ‘in supposing that it would be an elaborate plot. It wasn’t. These people were actors and not used to writing their own

plots: it was in fact an incredibly simple plot. “Let’s all put on our greasepaint again and create as much delay as possible while, under the Clown make-up, the red mark fades. And the best way to draw attention from the Clown, will be to draw it towards Othello.” No doubt they will have added civilly, “James—is that all right with you?”

‘And so,’ said Inspector Cockrill, ‘we come back again to James Dragon. Within the past hour he had had a somewhat difficult time. Within the past hour his company had been gravely threatened and by the treachery of his own wife; within the past hour his wife had been strangled and his father had become a self-confessed murderer... And now he was to act, without rehearsal and without lines, a part which might yet bring him to the Old Bailey and under sentence of death. It was no wonder, perhaps, that when the greasepaint was wiped away from his face that night, our friend thought he seemed to have aged...’ If, he added, their friend really had thought so at the time and was not now being wise after the event.

He was able to make this addition because their friend had just got up and, with a murmured excuse, had left the room. In search of a white rabbit, perhaps?

Blood Brothers

‘AND DEVOTED, I HEAR,’ he says, ‘David and Jonathan,’ he says. ‘In fact you might properly be called,’ he says, with that glitter in his eye, ‘blood brothers?’

Well, he can sneer but it’s true we was pally enough, Fred and me, till Lydia came along. Shared the same digs in the village—Birdswell’s our village, if you know it?—Birdswell, in Kent. Everyone in Birdswell knows us—even if they can’t easily tell the difference between us—and used to say how wonderful it was, us two so alike, with our strong legs and big shoulders and curly red hair, like a kid’s: and what a beautiful understanding we had, what a bond of union. People talk a lot of crap about identical twins.

Lydia couldn’t tell the difference between us either—seemingly. Was that my fault? Fair enough, she was Fred’s girl first—unless you counted her husband, and to some extent you did have to count him: six foot five, he is, and it isn’t only because he’s the blacksmith that they call him in the village, Black Will. But she switched to me of her own accord, didn’t she?—even if I wasn’t too quick to disillusion her, the first time she started with her carryings-on, mistaking me for Fred. ‘*I can’t help it if she fancies me more than you, now,*’ I said to Fred.

‘You’ll regret this, you two-timing, double-crossing bastard,’ said Fred: he always did have a filthy temper, Fred.

Well, I did regret it: and not so very long after. Fred and me shares a car between us—a heavy old, bashed-up, fourth-hand ‘family model’, but at least it goes. And one evening, when he’d slouched off, ugly and moody as he was those days, to poach the river down by the Vicarage woods, I picked

up Lydia and took her out in it, joy-riding. Not that there was much joy in it. We hadn't been out twenty minutes when, smooching around with Lydia, I suppose, not paying enough attention to the road—well, I didn't see the kid until I'd hit him. Jogging along the grass verge he was, with his little can of blackberries: haring home as fast as his legs would go, a bit scared, I daresay, because the dark was catching up on him. Well—the dark caught him up all right: poor little bastard. I scrambled out and knelt down and turned him over; and got back again, quick. 'He's gone,' I said to Lydia, 'and we'd best be gone too.' She made a lot of fuss, woman-like, but what was the point of it? If he wasn't dead now, he would be mighty soon, there wasn't any doubt of it: lying there with the can still clutched in his fat little hand and the blackberries spilt, and scattered all around him. I couldn't do nothing; if I could have I dare say I'd have waited, but I couldn't. So what was the use of bringing trouble on myself, when the chances were that I could get clear away with it?

And I did get clear away with it. The road was hard and dry, the cars that followed and stopped must have obscured my tyre marks, if there were any. They found half a footprint in the dried mud, where I'd bent over him; but it was just a cheap, common make of shoe, pretty new so it had no particular marks to it; and a largish size, of course, but nothing out of the ordinary. No one knew I'd been on that road—everything Lydia did with us two was done in deep secret, because of Black Will. Will was doing time at the moment, for beating up a keeper who came on him, poaching, (we all spent most of our evenings poaching.) But he'd be back some day.

And Fred promised me an alibi, when I told him about it: clutching at his arm, shaking a bit by this time, losing confidence because Lydia was threatening to turn nasty. 'I'll say you was in the woods with me,' he said. And he did, too. They came to our door, 'regulation police enquiries'; but

Lydia wouldn't dare to tell, not really. I could see that in the light of day, and they had no other sort of reason to suspect me, especially. And nobody did—it could have been any stranger, speeding along the empty country roads. Fred pretended to be reluctant to alibi me, cagey about saying where we was—because of the poaching. He managed it fine, it sort of threw their interest half way in a different direction. I thought it was decent of Fred, considering about me and Lydia. But brotherly love is a wonderful thing, isn't it?

Or isn't it? Because it hadn't been all for nothing. No sooner was I clear of that lot than he says to me: 'Well—has she told you?'

'Told me what?' I says. 'Who? Lydia?'

'Lydia,' he says. 'She's having a baby.'

'Well, don't look at me,' I said, and quick. 'I've only been going with the girl a couple of weeks.'

'And her husband hasn't been going with her at all,' said Fred. 'On account of he's been in prison for the past five months.'

'For half killing a man,' I said, thoughtfully; and I looked Fred up and down. Fred and me are no weeds, like I said; but Black Will, he's half way to a giant.

'And due out at the end of October,' said Fred.

'Well, good luck to the two of you,' says I. 'It's nothing to do with me. I had her for a couple of weeks, and now even that's over. She reckons I ought to have stopped and seen to the kid: she's given me the bird.'

'She'll give you more than the bird,' he says, 'and me too when Will comes home. When he knows about the baby, he'll beat the rest out of her; and then God help you and me too.'

'The baby could be Jimmy Green's,' I said. 'Or Bill Bray's. She's been out with them, too.'

‘That’s her tales,’ he said, ‘to make you jealous. They’re a sight too scared of Will to let Lydia make up to them. And so ought you and I to have been too, if we’d had any sense.’ Only where Lydia was concerned, there never seemed to be time to have sense; and six months ago, Fred said, Black Will’s return had seemed like an aeon away. ‘So what are you going to do?’ I said.

‘What are *you* going to do?’ he said. ‘A hit-and-run driver—you can get a long stretch for that. The kid wasn’t dead yet, when they found him.’

Good old brotherly love!—Fred worrying about me, when after all I *had* pinched his girl. And him in such trouble himself.

We went out in the car, where no one could hear us: our old landlady’s pretty deaf and takes no interest at all in our comings and goings, but Fred wasn’t taking no chances...

Because it was all Fred’s idea: that I will say, and stick to it—it was Fred’s idea. Dead men tell no tales, said Fred; nor dead girls, neither. ‘If they find she’s in the family way—it’s like you said, she was spreading it around she’d been going with half the village. Once she was past talking, Will couldn’t pin it on us two: not to be certain.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ I said.

‘She’d be past talking about the hit-and-run, too,’ he said. ‘You say she’s sore about that. She won’t tell now, because it means admitting she was joy-riding with you; but once Black Will gets it out of her that she was—and he will—then she’ll tell about the accident too; it’ll make her feel easier.’

‘So what do you suggest?’ I said. ‘*I’m* not killing the girl, I can tell you that, flat.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’ll do that. You’ve done one killing,’ he said, not too pleasantly, I thought, ‘that’ll do for you. All I want from you now is an

alibi.'

'What, me alibi you?' I said. 'No one'd believe it for a minute. One twin speaking up for another—the whole village would testify how "close" we are.' (The whole village not knowing anything about us and Lydia.)

But Fred had thought of all that too. If a straight alibi failed, he said, there were other ways of playing it. He had it all worked out—suspiciously well worked out, I ought to have thought; but he gave me no time for thinking. 'It won't come to any alibi, our names probably won't even come into it—as you say, the baby could be fathered on half the male population of Birdswell. But if it does—well, you alibi for me, I alibi for you; they'll know it was one of us, but they'll never know which of us; and if they don't know which of us, they'll have to let both of us go.'

'And Black Will?' I said. 'When we've not only seduced his wife, but murdered her—which one of us will *he* let go?'

'Oh, well,' he said, 'we'd have to clear out anyway, if it got as far as that: start again somewhere else. But the chances are a hundred to one it'll never come to it. After all, no one suspected you of the hit-and-run affair.'

He kept coming back to that: and sort of—nastily. I didn't forget that I'd done him wrong, pinching his girl. But that was his lever, really: while he kept reminding me, he could pretty well force me to go in with him—he was in trouble, but I was in trouble deeper.

So we worked it out: we worked out everything, to the last detail. This was Tuesday, we'd do it Thursday night. I'd see nothing more of the girl; but he'd get her to go driving with him on pretence of talking over the baby business. And he'd lead round to the accident, advising her, maybe, to confess to the police it was me; and drive past where it happened. And get her to get out of the car and show him where the boy was lying... And then

—well, then there'd be a second hit-and-run killing on that lonely corner. 'You got away with it,' he kept saying. 'Why not another?'

There was a kind of—well, justice, in it, I thought. After all, it was because she was threatening to tell about the hit-and-run that I was letting her be murdered. 'But what about clues?' I said. 'Even I left a footprint.'

He had worked that out too. He and I are the same size, of course, and most of our clothes are the same as one another's. Not for any silly reason of dressing identical, but simply because when he'd go along shopping, I'd go along too, and mostly we'd like the same things; or he'd buy something and it'd be a success, so I'd buy the same, later. We must dress the same on the night, he said, because of the alibi: and we checked our stuff over, shoes, grey flannels, shirts, without jackets—this all happened in September. Our blue poplins were in the wash—we'd worn them clean Sunday, and second-day Monday; so it would have to be the striped wool-and-nylon—a bit warm for this weather, if anyone remarked it, but we'd have to risk that, I said, we daren't ask the old woman to wash out our blue ones special. The last thing we wanted, was to do anything out of the ordinary. That was what the police looked for: the break in routine. That was asking for it.

Our shoes were the same: same size, same make, bought together; a rubber sole with bars across it, but, like I said, new enough not to be worn down, or have any peculiarities. And everything else we'd wear identical: not only for the alibi, but in case of bits caught in the girl's finger-nails or what-not—you've only got to read the papers. Not that he meant to get near enough for that. But she might not—well, she might not kick-in at once, if you see what I mean; he might have to get out of the car and do something about it. And in case of scratches, he said, I'd better be prepared to get some

scratches on my own hands too—we could say we'd been blackberry-ing or something.

'Blackberry-ing,' I said. 'That'd be bloody likely! We both detest blackberries, everybody knows it: or anyway, the old woman knows it, we never touch her blackberry pie.' I knew he'd only said it to remind me of the kid: him and his little can of blackberries, spilt all around him...

'Oh, well,' he said, 'say we got scratched pushing through the brambles down by the river. Do your poaching down by the bramble patch.'

But she didn't scratch him. It was all a bit grim, I think: he couldn't be sure she was properly done-in and he had to get out of the car and have a look and—well, go back and take a second run at her. But she didn't have the strength left to scratch him. All the same, he looked pretty ghastly when finally we met in the moonlight, in the Vicarage woods. He didn't say anything, just stood there, staring at me with a sort of sick, white heaviness. I couldn't exactly say anything either; it was worse than, talking it over, I'd thought it ever would be. I sort of—looked a question at him; and he gave me a weary kind of nod and glanced away towards the river. It was easier to talk about my angle, so I said, at last: 'Well, I saw the Vicar.'

'But did he see you?' he said. We'd agreed on the Reverend, because he always walked across the church of a Thursday evening; you'd be sure of passing him, if you went at a certain time.

'Yes,' I said. 'He saw me. I gave a sort of grunt for "good evening" and he said "Going poaching?" and gave me a bit of a grin. You'd better remember that.' He nodded again but he said nothing more; and more to ease the silence than anything else, I said: 'Is the car all right? Not marked?'

'What does it matter if it is?' he said. 'It's marked all over, no one could say what's old or what's new: you know that, from bashing the boy.'

As for bits of her clothing and—blood and all that, he'd had the idea of spreading a bit of plastic over the front of the car before he—well, did it. He produced the plastic folded in a bit of brown paper, and we wrapped the whole lot round a stone and sank it, then and there, in the river. There was blood on the plastic all right. It gave me the shudders.

But next thing he said, I really had something to shudder at. He said: 'Anyway, *your* number's up, mate. She's shopped you.'

'Shopped me?' I said. I stood and stared at him.

'Shopped you,' he said. "She'd already sent off an anonymous note to the police. About the hit-and-run.'

'How do you know?' I said. I couldn't believe it.

'She told me so,' he said. 'It was on her conscience.'

Her conscience. Lydia's conscience! I started to laugh, a bit hysterical, I suppose, with the strain of it. He put his hand on my wrist and gave me a little shake. 'Steady lad,' he said. 'Don't lose your head. I'm looking after you.' It wasn't like him to be so demonstrative, but there you are—it's like the poem says, when times are bad, there isn't no friend like a brother. 'It's just a matter of slanting the alibi,' he said.

Well, we'd worked that out, too; like I said. There'd always be a risk that they wouldn't accept a brother's alibi, that we two was together. The other time, about the accident, they'd had no special reason to suspect me, they'd accepted that all right; but this might at any moment turn into a murder enquiry. And a murder enquiry into *us*, now they knew about the hit-and-run. But as he said—we had the alternative.

I hadn't counted on its being Inspector Cockrill. When I realised it was him—come all the way over from Heronsford—I knew they meant business. And to be honest, it struck a bit chill to the heart of me. A little man he is, for a policeman, and near retiring age, he must be—he looks like

a grandfather; but his eyes are as bright as a bird's and they seem to look right into you. He came into the old woman's best parlour and he had us brought in there, and he looked us up and down. 'Well, well,' he said, 'the famous Birdswell twins! You certainly are identicals, aren't you?' And he gave us a look of a sort of fiendish glee, or so it seemed to me, and said: 'And devoted, I hear? An almost mystic bond, I hear? David and Jonathan, Damon and Pythias and all the rest of it? In fact,' he said, 'you might properly be called—blood brothers?'

We stood in front of him, silent. He said at last: 'Well, which is which?—and no nonsense.'

We told him: *and* no nonsense.

'So you're the one that killed the child?' he said to me. 'And drove on, regardless.'

'I never was near the child,' I said. 'I was in the woods, on Monday evening—poaching.'

'Yours is the name stated in the anonymous letter.'

'I don't know who wrote the letter,' I said. 'But no one can tell us apart, me and my brother.'

'Even your fancy girl?' he said. 'It appears it was she who wrote the letter.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said, 'by my fancy girl.'

'Well, everybody else does,' he said. 'All the village knows she was playing you off, one against the other. And grinning behind their hands, waiting for her husband's home-coming.'

'But all the village can't tell us two apart,' I said. 'I was out poaching.'

'That's a damn lie,' says Fred, playing it the way we'd agreed upon. 'That was me, poaching.'

‘One of you was poaching?’ says Inspector Cockrill, very smooth. ‘And one of you was with the lady? And even the lady couldn’t have said which was which?’

He said it sort of—suggestive. ‘I dare say she might,’ I said, ‘later on in the proceedings. But there wouldn’t have been any proceedings that night, there wouldn’t have been time: because the accident happened.’

‘Why should she say so positively that it was you, then?’

‘I dare say she thought it was,’ I says. ‘I dare say he told her so. She’d finished with him: it would be the only way he could get her.’

‘I see,’ said Inspector Cockrill. ‘How very ingenious!’ I didn’t know whether he meant how ingenious of Fred to have thought of it then, or of me to think of it now.

‘Don’t you listen to him, sir,’ says Fred. ‘He’s a bloody liar. I wasn’t with the girl that night. I tell you—I was poaching.’

‘All right, you were poaching,’ said Inspector Cockrill. ‘Any witnesses?’

‘Of course not. You don’t go poaching with witnesses. I used to go with him,’ said Fred, bitterly, gesturing with his head towards me, ‘but not since he pinched my girl, the bloody so-and-so.’

‘And last night?’ says the Inspector softly. ‘When the girl was murdered?’

‘Last night too, the same,’ said Fred. ‘I was in the woods poaching.’

‘*You call me* a liar!’ I said. ‘It was me in the woods. The Vicar saw me going there.’

‘It was me the Vicar saw,’ said Fred. ‘I told him, Good evening, and he laughed and said, “Going poaching?” ’

‘There!’ said Inspector Cockrill to me, like a teacher patiently getting the truth from a difficult child. ‘How could he know *that*? Because the

Vicar will surely confirm it?’

‘He knows it because I told him,’ I said. ‘I told him I’d been poaching and I hoped the Vicar hadn’t really realised where I was going.’

‘Very ingenious,’ said Inspector Cockrill again. ‘Ve-ry ingenious.’ It seemed like he couldn’t get over it all, sitting there shaking his head at the wonder of it. But I knew he was playing for time, I knew that we’d foxed him. And Fred knew too. He suggested, reasonably: ‘Why should you be so sure, sir, that the girl was murdered? Why not just a second hit-and-run?’

‘A bit of a coincidence?’ said Inspector Cockrill, mildly. ‘Same thing, in the same place and so very soon after? And when on top of it, we find that the girl was threatening a certain person with exposure, about the *first* hit-and-run...’ He left it in the air. He said to his sergeant: ‘Have you collected their clobber?’

‘Yessir,’ said the sergeant. Two pairs of shoes—’ and he gave the Inspector a sort of nod, as if to say, Yes, they look as if they’ll match very nicely—‘and all the week’s laundry.’

‘Including Monday’s?’ says Cockrill.

‘Including Monday evening’s, sir. The old woman washes of a Monday morning. Anything they’ve worn after that—which includes two shirts to each, sir—is in two laundry baskets, one in each bedroom.’

‘Two baskets?’ he says, looking more bright-eyed than ever. ‘That’s a bit of luck. Their laundry’s kept separate, is it?’

‘Yes, it is,’ says Fred, though I don’t know what call he had to butt in. ‘His in his room, mine in mine.’

‘And no chance of its getting mixed up?’ said Inspector Cockrill. He fixed Fred with that beady eye of his. ‘This could be important.’

Fred, of course, was maintaining the mutual-accusation arrangement we’d agreed upon. ‘Not a chance, sir,’ he said a bit too eagerly.

I wasn't going to be left out. I said: 'Not the slightest.'

'That's right, sir,' says the sergeant. 'The old lady confirms it.'

'Good,' said Cockrill. He gave a few orders and the sergeant went away. People were still buzzing about, up in our bedrooms. 'I'm coming,' called up the Inspector, to someone at the head of the stairs. He turned back to us. 'All right, Cain and Abel,' he said, 'I'll leave you to stew in it. But in a day or two, as the song says, "I'll be seeing you." And when I do, it'll be at short notice. So stick around, won't you?'

'And if we don't?' I said. 'You've got nothing against us, you can't charge us; you've got no call to be giving us orders.'

'Who's giving orders?' he said. 'Just a little advice. But before you ignore the advice—take a good, hard, look at yourselves. You won't need any mirrors. And ask yourselves,' he said, giving us a good, hard, long look on his own account, from the soles of our feet to the tops of our flaming red heads, 'just how far you'd get...'

So that was that; and for the next two days, we 'stewed in it': David and Jonathan, Cain and Abel—like he'd said, blood brothers.

On the third day, he sent for us, to Heronsford police station. They shoved Fred into one little room and me in another. He talked to Fred first, and I waited. All very chummy, fags and cups of tea and offers of bread and butter: but it was the waiting...

Long after I knew I couldn't stand one more minute of it, he came. I suppose they muttered some formalities, but I don't remember: Fred and I might hate one another, and by this time we did, well and truly, there's no denying it—but it was worse, a thousand times worse, without him there. My head felt as though it were filled with grey cotton-wool, little stuffy, warm clouds of it. He sat down in front of me. He said: 'Well—have you come to your senses? Of course you killed her?'

‘If anyone killed her,’ I said, clinging to our patter, ‘it must have been him.’

‘Your brother?’ he said. ‘But why should your brother have killed her?’

‘Well,’ I says, ‘if the girl was having a baby—’

‘A baby?’ he says, surprised; and his eyes got that bright, glittering look in them. He said after a minute of steady thinking: ‘But she wasn’t.’

‘She wasn’t?’ I said. ‘She *wasn’t*? But she’d told him—’

Or hadn’t she told him? Something, like an icicle of light, ice-cold, piercing, brilliant, thrust itself into the dark places of my cotton-wool mind. I said: ‘The bloody, two-timing, double-crossing bastard...!’

‘*He* didn’t seem,’ said the Inspector, softly, ‘to expect her to have been found pregnant.’

So that was it! So *that* was it! So as to get me to agree to the killing, to get me to assist with it... I ought to have been more fly—why should Fred, of all people, be so much afraid of Black Will as to go in for murder? Will’s a dangerous man, but Fred’s not exactly a softie... The icicle turned in my mind and twisted, probing with its light-rays into the cotton-woolliness. Revenge! Cold, sullen, implacable revenge upon the two of us—because Lydia had come to me: because I had taken her. Death for her: and I to be the accomplice in her undoing—in my own undoing. And for me... I knew now who had sent the anonymous note about the hit-and-run accident: so easily to be ‘traced’ (after she was dead) to Lydia.

But yet—he was as deep in it as I was: deeper, had he but known it. I said, fighting my way up out of the darkness: ‘Even if she *had* been pregnant, it wouldn’t have been my fault. I’d only been going a couple of weeks with the girl.’

‘That’s what you say,’ he said.

‘But all the village—’

‘All the village knew there were goings-on; nobody knew just where they went on, or when. You must, all three, have been remarkably careful.’

I tried another tack. ‘But if she wasn’t pregnant—why should I have killed her?’

‘You’ve just told me yourself that you thought she was,’ he said.

‘Because he told me—my brother told me. Now, look, Inspector,’ I said, trying to think it out as I went along, trying to ram it home to him, ‘you say she wasn’t having a baby? So why should I have thought she was? *She* wouldn’t have told me, if she hadn’t been: why should she? It was he who told me: it was my brother. But you say yourself, he knew it wasn’t true. So why should he have told me?’

He looked at me, cold as ice. He said: ‘That’s easy. He wanted you to kill her for him.’

He wanted me to kill her! I could have laughed. The thing was getting fantastic, getting out of hand; and yet at the same time I had the feeling that the fantasy was a hard, gripping, grim fantasy that, once it had its hold on me, would never shake loose. I stammered out: ‘Why should he have wanted her killed?’

‘Because,’ he said, ‘she was threatening to tell that it was he who ran the child down, and left it to die.’ And he said, cold and bitter: ‘I have no wish to trap you. We know that it was your brother who killed the child: we have proof of it. And we know it was you who killed the girl. We have proof of that too: there’s her blood on your cuff.’

On my cuff. Where he had put his hand that night: taking my wrist in his grasp, giving me a brotherly little shake ‘to steady me’. I remembered how I’d thought, even then, that it wasn’t like him to be so demonstrative.

Putting his hand on my wrist—fresh from the blood-smeared plastic. Making such a point, later on, about there being no chance of our soiled shirts getting confused, one with the other’s...

So there it is. I wonder if we’ll be doing our time in the same prison?—sharing the same cell, maybe?—we two blood brothers...

Because he’ll be doing time all right, as well as me. While I’m doing my time for *his* killing of the girl—he’ll be doing his, for my killing of the child.

Well—that’s all right with me. He’ll be first out, I dare say, (is it murder to leave a kid to die, in case, when he gets better, he tells? I suppose not: the actual knocking-down would be accidental, after all.) So Fred’ll be out, first: and Black Will will be there to meet him when he comes. By the time I get out, I dare say Will will be ‘in’ for what he done to Fred; may even have got over it all by then—it looks like being a very long time away.

But can you beat it?—working it out so far ahead, leading up to it so patiently, so softly, so craftily? Planting the blood on my cuff: and then leading up to it so softly, so craftily... And all for revenge: revenge on his own twin brother!

After all, what *I* did, was done in self-preservation: there was no venom in it, I wished him no harm. That night after the accident, I mean: when, clutching his arm, begging him to help me—just to be on the safe side, I rubbed his sleeve with the juice of a blackberry.

The Hornets' Nest

‘WE’VE GOT HORNETS NESTING AGAIN in that old elm,’ said Mr. Caxton, gulping down his last oyster, wiping thick fingers on his table napkin. ‘Interesting things, hornets.’ He interrupted himself, producing a large white handkerchief and violently blowing his nose. ‘Damn these colds of mine!’

‘I saw you were treating them,’ said Inspector Cockrill; referring, however, to the hornets. ‘There’s a tin of that WASP-WAS stuff on your hall table.’

Cyrus Caxton ignored him. ‘Interesting things, I was saying. I’ve been reading up about them.’ Baleful and truculent, he looked round at the guests assembled for his wedding feast. ‘At certain times of the year,’ he quoted, ‘there are numerous males, the drones, which have very large eyes and whose only activity is to eat—’ he glared round at them again, with special reference to the gentlemen present—and to participate in the mass flight after the virgin queen.’ He cast upon his bride a speculative eye. ‘You are well named Elizabeth, my dear,’ he said. ‘Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen.’ And added with ugly significance, ‘I hope.’

‘But only one of the hornets succeeds in the mating,’ said Inspector Cockrill into the ensuing outraged silence. ‘And he dies in the process.’ He sat back and looked Cyrus Caxton in the face, deliberately; and twiddled his thumbs.

Cyrus Caxton was a horrid old man. He had been horrid to his first wife and now was quite evidently going to be horrid to his second—she had been the late Mrs. Caxton’s nurse, quite young still and very pretty in a blue-eyed, broken-hearted sort of way. And he was horrid to his own stout son, Theo,

who was only too thankful to live away from papa, playing in an amateurish way with stocks and shares, up in London; and horrid to his step-son, Bill, who, brought into the family by the now departed wife, had immediately been pushed off to relatives in the United States to be out of Mr. Caxton's way. And he was horrid to poor young Dr. Ross who, having devotedly attended the wife in her last illness, now as devotedly attended Mr. Caxton's own soaring blood-pressure and resultant apoplectic fits; and horrid to his few friends and many poor relations, all of whom he kept on tenterhooks with promises of remembrances in his will when one of the choking fits should have carried him off. He would no doubt have been horrid to Inspector Cockrill; but—Mr. Caxton being incapable of keeping peaceably to a law designed for other people as well as for himself—Cockie got in first and was horrid to *him*. It must have been Elizabeth, he reflected, who had promoted his invitation to the wedding.

The little nurse had stayed on to help with things after the poor wife died; had gradually drifted into indisposability and so into accepting the pudgy hand of the widower. Not without some heart-searching however; Inspector Cockrill himself had, in his off-duty moments, lent a shoulder in those days of Mr. Caxton's uninhibited courtship; and she had had a little weep there, and told him of the one great love lost to her, and how she no longer looked for that kind of happiness in marriage; but was sick of work, sick of loneliness, sick of insecurity... 'But a trained nurse like you can get wonderful jobs,' Inspector Cockrill had protested. 'Travel all over the place, see the world.' She *had* seen the world, she said, and it was too big, it scared her; she wanted to stay put, she wanted a home: and a home meant a man. 'There are other men?' he had suggested; and she had burst out that there were indeed other men, too many men, all men—it was dreadful, it was frightening, to be the sort of woman that, for some unknown reason, all

men looked at, all men gooped at, all men—wanted. ‘With him, at least I’ll be safe; no one will dare to—to drool over me like that when he’s around.’ Inspector Cockrill had somewhat hurriedly disengaged his shoulder. He was a younger man in those days of Mr. Caxton’s second marriage and subsequent departure from this life; and taking no chances.

And so the affair had gone forward. The engagement and imminent wedding had been announced and in the same breath the household staff—faithful apparently in death as in life, to the late Mrs. Caxton—had made their own announcement: they had Seen it Coming and were now sweeping out in a body, preferring, thank you very much, not to continue in service under That Nurse. The bride, un-chaperoned, had perforce modestly retired to a London hotel and from thence left most of the wedding arrangements to Son Theo and Step-son Bill—Theo running up and down from London, Bill temporarily accommodated for the occasion beneath the family roof.

Despite the difficulties of its achievement, Mr. Caxton was far from satisfied with the wedding breakfast. ‘I never did like oysters, Elizabeth, as you must very well know. Why couldn’t we have had smoked salmon? And I don’t like cold meat, I don’t like it in any form. Not in *any* form,’ he insisted, looking once again at his virgin queen with an ugly leer. Inspector Cockrill surprised upon the faces of all the males present, drones and workers alike, a look of malevolence which really quite shocked him.

She protested, trembling. ‘But, Cyrus, it’s been so difficult with no servants. We got what was easiest.’

‘Very well, then. Having got it, let us have it.’ He gestured to the empty oyster shells. ‘With all these women around—am I to sit in front of a dirty plate for ever?’

The female relations upon this broad hint rose from their places like a flock of sitting pheasants and began scurrying to and fro, clearing used

crockery, passing plates of chicken and ham. 'Don't over-do it, my dears,' said Mr. Caxton, sardonically watching their endeavours. 'You're all out of the will now, you know.'

It brought them up short: the crudeness, the brutality of it—standing staring back at him, the plates in their shaking hands. Half of them, probably, cared not two pence for five, or five-and-twenty pounds in Cyrus Caxton's will, but they turned, nevertheless, upon the new heiress questioning—reproachful?—eyes. 'Oh, but Cyrus, that's not true,' she cried; above his jeering protests insisted: 'Cyrus has destroyed his old will, yes; but he's made a new one and—well, I mean, no one has been forgotten, I'm sure, who was mentioned before.'

The lunch progressed. Intent, perhaps, to show their disinterestedness, the dispossessed scuttled back and forth with the cold meats, potato mayonnaise, sliced cucumber—poured delicious barley water (for Mr. Caxton was a rabid teetotaller) into cut glass tumblers, worthy of better things. The bridegroom munched his way through even the despised cold viands in a manner that boded ill, thought Inspector Cockrill, for the wretched Elizabeth, suddenly coming alive to the horror of what she had taken upon herself. She sat silent and shrinking and made hardly any move to assist with the serving. Son Theo carved and sliced, Step-son Bill handed plates, even young Dr. Ross wandered round with the salad bowl; but the bride sat still and silent and those three, thought Cockie, could hardly drag their eyes from the small white face and the dawning terror there. The meat plates were removed, the peaches lifted one by one from their tall bottles and placed, well soured with syrup, on their flowery plates. Step-son Bill dispensed the silver dessert spoons and forks, fanned out ready on the sideboard. The guests sat civilly, spoons poised, ready to begin.

Cyrus Caxton waited for no one. He gave a last loud trumpeting blow to his nose, stuffed away his handkerchief, picked up the spoon beside his plate and somewhat ostentatiously looked to see if it was clean: plunged spoon and fork into the peach, spinning dizzily before him in its syrup, and, scooping off a large chunk, slithered it into his mouth: stiffened—stared about him with a wild surmise—gave one gurgling roar of mingled rage and pain, turned first white, then purple, then an even more terrifying dingy, dark red; and pitched forward across the table with his face in his plate. Elizabeth cried out: ‘He’s swallowed the peach stone!’

Dr. Ross was across the room in three strides, grasped the man by the hair and chin and laid him back in his chair. The face looked none the more lovely for being covered in syrup and he wiped it clean with one swipe of a table napkin; and stood for what seemed a long moment, hands on the arms of the chair, gazing down, intent and abstracted, at the spluttering mouth and rolling eyes. Like a terrier, Elizabeth was to say later to Inspector Cockrill, alert and suspicious, snuffing the scent. Then with another of his swift movements, he was hauling Mr. Caxton out of his chair, lowering him to the floor; calling out, ‘Elizabeth!—my bag. On a chair in the hall.’ But she seemed struck motionless by the sudden horror of it all and only stammered out, imploring, ‘Theo?’ Stout Theo, nearest the door, bestirred himself to dash out into the hall, appearing a moment later with the bag. Step-son Bill, kneeling with the doctor beside the heaving body, took it from him, opened it out. Elizabeth, shuddering, said again: ‘He must have swallowed the stone.’

The doctor ignored her. He had caught up the fallen table-napkin and was using it to grasp, with his left hand, the man’s half-swallowed tongue and pull it forward to free the air-passages; at the same time with his right groping blindly towards the medical bag. ‘A finger-stall—it’s just on top,

somewhere....' Bill found it immediately and handed it to him; he shuffled it on and thrust the middle finger of his right hand down the gagging throat. 'Nothing there,' he said, straightening up, standing looking down, absently wiping his fingers on the table-napkin, rolling off the finger-stall—all again with that odd effect of sniffing the air; galvanising into action once more, however, to fall on his knees beside the body. With the heel of his left hand he began a quick, sharp pumping at the sternum, with his right he gestured towards the medical bag. 'The hypodermic. Adrenalin ampoules in the left pocket.' Bill fumbled, unaccustomed, and he lifted his head for a moment and said, sharply: 'For heaven's sake—Elizabeth?' She jumped, startled. 'Yes? Yes?' she said, staccato; and seemed to come suddenly to her senses. 'Yes, of course I'll do it.' She dropped to her knees beside the bag, found the ampoules, filled the syringe. 'Keep it ready,' he said. 'Somebody cut away the sleeve.' He took both hands to the massage of the heart. 'While I do this—can someone give him the kiss of life?'

It was a long time since anyone, his affianced not excluded, had willingly given Mr. Caxton a kiss of any kind and it could not now be said that volunteers came eagerly forward. The doctor said again, 'Elizabeth?' but this time on a note of doubt. She looked down, faltering at the gaping mouth, dreadfully dribbling. 'Must I?'

'You're a nurse,' said Dr. Ross. 'And he's dying.'

'Yes. Yes, of course I must.' She brought out a small handkerchief, scrubbed at her own mouth as though somehow irrationally to cleanse it before a task so horrible; moved to crouch where she would not interfere with the massage of the heart. 'Now?'

Mercifully, Cyrus Caxton himself provided the answer—suddenly and unmistakably giving up the ghost. He heaved up into a last great, lunging spasm, screamed briefly and rolled up his eyes. She sat back on her heels,

the handkerchief balled against her mouth, gaping. Dr. Ross abandoned the heart massage, thrust her aside, himself began a mouth-to-mouth breathing. But even he soon admitted defeat. 'It's no use,' he said, straightening up, his hands to his aching back. 'He's gone.'

Gone: and not one, perhaps, in all that big ugly ornate room but felt a sort of lightening of relief, a sort of little lifting of the heart because with the going of Cyrus Caxton so much of ugliness, crudity, cruelty also had gone. Not one, at any rate, even to pretend to grief. Only the widowed bride, still kneeling by the heavy body, lifted her head and looked across with a terrible question into the doctor's eyes; and leapt to her feet and darted out into the hall. She came back and stood in the doorway. 'The tin of cyanide,' she said. 'It's gone.'

Dr. Ross picked up the dropped table-napkin and quietly, unobtrusively yet very deliberately, laid it over the half eaten peach.

Inspector Cockrill's underlings dealt with the friends and relations, despatching them to their deep chagrin about their respective businesses, relieved of any further glorious chance of notoriety. The tin had been discovered without much difficulty, hidden in a vase of pampas grass which stood in the centre of the hall table: its lid off and a small quantity of the paste missing, scooped out, apparently, with something so smooth as to show no peculiarities of marking, at any rate to the naked eye. It had been on the table since some time on the day before the wedding. Cockie himself had seen it there, just before the lunch.

He thought it all over, deeply and quietly—for it had been a plot deeply and quietly laid. 'I'll see those four for myself,' he said to his sergeant. 'Mrs. Caxton, of course, the son and the step-son and the doctor.' These were the principals and one might as well tease them a little and see what emerged; but for the rest of course—he knew¹: the how and the when

and the why, and therefore the who. Some details to be sorted out, naturally; but for the rest—he knew; a few words recollected, a dozen, no more—and with a little reflection, how clear it all became! Curious, thought Cockie, how two brief sentences, hardly attended to, might so twist themselves about and about as to wind themselves at last into a rope. Into a noose.

He established himself in what had been Cyrus Caxton's study and sent for Elizabeth. 'Well, Mrs. Caxton?'

White teeth dug into a trembling lower lip to bite back hysteria. 'Oh, Inspector, at least don't call me by that horrible name!'

'It is your name now; and we're engaged upon a murder investigation. There's no time for nonsense.'

'You don't really believe—'

'You know it,' said Cockie. 'You were the first to know it.'

'Dr. Ross was the first,' she said. 'You saw him yourself, Inspector, leaning over Cyrus as he was lying back in that chair; sort of—snuffing. Like a terrier on the scent. He could smell the cyanide on his breath, I'm sure he could; like bitter almonds they say it is.'

It had not needed an analyst to detect the white traces of poison on the peach and in the heavy syrup. 'Who brought the food for the luncheon, Mrs. Caxton?'

'Well, we all... We talked it over, Theo and Bill and I. It was so difficult, you see, with no servants; and me being in London. I ordered most of the stuff to be sent down from Harrod's and Theo brought down—well, one or two things from Fortnum and Mason's...' Her voice trailed away rather unhappily.

'Which one or two things? The peaches, you mean?'

'Well, yes, the peaches. He brought them down himself, yesterday. He was up and down from London all the time, helping Bill. But,' she cried,

imploringly, 'why should Theo possibly have done this terrible thing? His own father! For that matter, why should anyone?'

'Ah, as to that!' said Cockie. Had not Cyrus Caxton spoken his own epitaph? *At certain times there are numerous males, the drones, which have very large eyes and whose only activity is to eat and to participate in the mass flight after the virgin queen.* He had seen them himself, stuffing down Mr. Caxton's oysters and cold chicken and ham, their eyes, dilated with devotion, fixed with an astonishing unanimity upon Mr. Caxton's bride. '*Only one of them mates, however,*' he repeated to himself, '*and he dies in the process.*' That also had been seen to be true. 'Elizabeth,' he said, forgetting for a moment that this was a murder investigation and there was to be no nonsense, 'from the hornet's-eye angle, I'm afraid you are indeed a virgin queen.'

And Theo, the young drone, stout and lethargic, playing with his stocks and shares in his cosy London flat... Inspector Cockrill had known him since his boyhood. 'You needn't think, Cockie, that I wanted my father's money. I'm all right: I got my share of my mother's money when she died.'

'Oh, did you?' said Cockrill. 'And her other son, Bill?'

'She left it to my father, to pass on if he thought it was right.'

'Wasn't that a bit unfair? He wasn't Bill's own father; and it was her money.'

'I think she'd probably sort of written him off. I mean, it's easy enough to hop across from America nowadays, isn't it? But he never came to see her. Though I believe the servants let him know, when she was dying; and they did correspond. In secret; my father would never have allowed it, of course.'

‘Of course!’ said Cockie. He dismissed the matter of money. ‘How well, Theo, did you know your father’s new wife?’

‘Not at all well. I saw her when I came to visit my mother during her illness, and again at the funeral after she died. But of course...’ But of course, his tone admitted, a man didn’t have to know Elizabeth well, to... There was that something...

‘You never contemplated marrying her yourself?’

But Theo, lazy and self-indulgent, was not for the married state. ‘All the same, Inspector, it did make me pretty sick to think of it. I mean, my own father....’

Would Theo, dog in the manger, almost physically revolted by the thought of his adored in the gross arms of his own father—would Theo kill for that? ‘These bottled peaches, Theo. You served them out, I know; but who actually opened them? I mean, had they been unsealed in advance?’

‘No, because they’d have lost the bouquet of the Kirsch. Right up to the last minute, they were sealed.’

‘Can you prove that?’

‘Elizabeth can bear me out. We nipped in here on the way to the wedding—I drove her down from London—for me to go to the loo in case I should start hopping in church. And she took a quick dekko just to see that everything looked all right. She’ll tell you the bottles were still sealed up then; you can ask her.’

‘How quick a dekko? Tell me about this visit.’

‘Oh, good heavens, Inspector!—the whole thing took three minutes, we were late and you know what the old man was. We rushed in, I dashed into the cloakroom, when I came out she was standing at the dining-room door, looking in, and she said, “It all looks wonderful,” and what a good job

Bill and I had done. Then *she* went into the cloakroom and we both got into the car and went off again.'

'Was the tin of cyanide on the hall table then?'

'Yes, because she said thank goodness Bill seemed to have got it for her and saved her more trouble with Father.'

'No one else was in the house at this time?'

'No, Bill had gone on to the church with my father.'

'O.K. Well, send this Bill to me, will you, Theo? And tell him to bring his passport with him.'

He was ten years older than his step-brother; well into his thirties: blond headed, incisive, tough, an ugly customer probably on a dirty night; but rather an engaging sort of chap for all that. Cockie turned over the pages of the passport. 'You haven't been in this country since you were a boy?'

'No, they shipped me out as a kid, my new papa didn't want me and my mother doesn't seem to have put up too much of a fight for me. So I wasn't all that crazy to come rushing home on visits.'

'Not even when she died?'

'At that time I was—prevented,' he said briefly.

'By what, if I may ask?'

'By four stone walls,' said Step-son Bill, ruefully. 'Which in my case, Inspector, did a prison make. In other words, I was doing time, sir. I got into a fight with a guy and did six months for him. I only got out a few weeks ago.'

'A fight about what?'

'About my wife, if you have to know,' he said, sullenly, 'I was bumming around, I admit it, and I guess he got her on the rebound. Well, bum or not, I took and chucked her out and that was the end of her. And I

took and pulled him in, and that was the end of *him*—in the role of seducer, anyway.’

‘You divorced your wife?’

‘Yeh, I divorced her.’ He looked at Inspector Cockrill and the hard, bright eyes had suddenly a look almost of despair. ‘I think now I made some pretty bad mistakes,’ he said.

‘At any rate, having got out, you learned that your stepfather was marrying the nurse; that your mother’s money was in jeopardy, perhaps? So you came across hot foot, to look the lady over?’

And having looked her over... Another drone, drawn, willy-nilly—the more so for having been for long months starved of the company of women, for having been deprived of the wife whom he still loved—into the mass flight after the virgin queen. ‘It was you, I believe, who brought the poison into the house?’

‘Yes, I did. The old man was furious with Elizabeth because she hadn’t ordered it. How could she, poor girl, when she wasn’t here half the time? So I went down and fetched it, just to save her more trouble, and put it on the hall table so he’d think she’d got it.’

‘But she was in London: how could she?’

‘Oh, heck, he couldn’t care: if it wasn’t there, she was responsible.’

‘And after all this alleged fuss and urgency, it never got used?’

‘Didn’t I tell you?—it was only to make more trouble for Elizabeth. He was a man that just loved to find fault.’

‘I see. Well, we agree it was you who introduced the cyanide. Was it not also you who handed a plate of cold meat to your step-father?’

‘Was it I who—? For heaven’s sakes, Inspector! Those old ladies were running around like a lot of decapitated hens, snatching plates out of our hands, dumping them down in front of just anyone who’d accept them.’

‘You might, however, have said specifically to one of them, “This plate is especially for Mr. Caxton.” ’

‘I might at that,’ said Bill, cheerfully. ‘Why don’t you ask around and find her: she’ll tell you.’ He shrugged. ‘Anyway, what does it matter? The poison wasn’t on the meat, was it? It had been put on the peach.’

‘If it had,’ said Cockie, ‘it had been put there by someone very clever.’ He dwelt on it. ‘How could it have been placed there so that the whole dose—to all intents and purposes—was on the one mouthful that he happened to take? The first mouthful?’

And he sent Step-son Bill away and summoned Dr. Ross. ‘Well, doctor—so we have it. *Only one mates; and he dies in the process.*’

‘You’re referring to the thing about the hornets?’ said Dr. Ross rather stiffly.

‘That’s right: to the thing about the hornets. But nobody could call *you* a drone, doctor. So busy with that little bag of yours that you had it with you out in the hall, all ready to hand.’

‘At intervals of about one week,’ said Dr. Ross, ‘policemen like yourself exhort us not to leave our medical bags in unattended cars.’ He fixed Inspector Cockrill with a dark and very angry eye. ‘Are you suggesting that it was I who murdered my own patient?’

‘Will you declare yourself outside the mass flight, Dr. Ross? You must have seen a good deal of our little queen in the sick-room of the late Mrs. Caxton.’

‘I happen to have a little queen of my own, Inspector. Not to mention several little drones, not yet ready for flighting.’

‘I know,’ said Cockie. ‘It must have been hell for you.’ He said it very kindly. He added: ‘I accuse you of nothing.’

Disarmed, he capitulated, immediately, wretchedly. 'I've never so much as touched her hand, Inspector. But it's true—there's something about her... And to think of that filthy old brute....'

'Well, he's gone,' said Cockie. 'Murdered under your nose—and mine. And talking of noses—'

'I smelt it on his breath. Oh, gosh, the faintest whiff—but there was something. I thought it must be just the Kirsch—the Kirsch on the peaches.'

'Such a curious meal!' said Inspector Cockrill, brooding over it. 'He was the bridegroom: you'd think somebody would be falling over themselves to please him. But no: he didn't like oysters, but he has to have oysters, he hated cold meat but all there is, is cold meat, he was violently teetotal but he's given peaches with liqueur on 'em.' He sat with his chin on his hand, his bright eyes gazing away into nothingness. 'There has been a plan here, doctor: no simple matter of a lick of poison scraped out of a fortuitous tin, smeared on to a fortuitous peach-in-liqueur; but a very elaborate, deep laid, long-thought-out, absolutely sure-fire plan. But who planned it, who carried it out and with what ultimate motive...' He broke off. He said at last, slowly: 'Of course whatever's in the will, as the law goes now she will still be a rich widow; more agreeable to her, presumably, than being a rich wife.'

'You don't honestly think that Elizabeth—?'

'Elizabeth had nothing to do with the preparation of the food; she hasn't been in the house for the past three days, except for that brief interlude when she and Theo came in on their way to the church. Each of them was alone for a period of a minute or two—Elizabeth probably for less. Not nearly enough time to have chanced prising open the tin, scooping out the stuff, doctoring the peaches (which anyway were still in sealed bottles) or the cold meat or oysters. On the other hand—Elizabeth is a

trained nurse...' He mused over it. 'He had a bad cold. Could she have persuaded him to take some drug or other? On the way back from the church, for example.'

'He was a man who wouldn't touch medicines. He got these colds, the place was stiff with pills and potions I'd prescribed for him, but he'd never even try them. Besides,' he insisted, as Bill had before him, 'the stuff was on the peach?' And it was that fat slob Theo who had been responsible for the peach. Not that he wanted to suggest, he added rather hurriedly, that Theo would have murdered his own father. But...'You needn't think I haven't seen him gooping at her.'

'You needn't think I haven't seen you all gooping at her.'

'I've made up my mind,' said the doctor, quietly and humbly, 'if I can get out of this business with my family still safe and sound, never, so long as I can help it, to see Elizabeth again.'

'You are a worker,' said Cockie. 'Not a true drone. It will be easier for you. Bill is a drone; he admits it—only *he* calls it a bum.'

And so was fat Theo a drone. Bill, Theo, the doctor...

But the doctor had a family of his own, whom he had had no intention, ever, of deserting for Elizabeth the Virgin Queen. And for that matter, so had Bill a wife of his own, whom, even now, even knowing Elizabeth, he cared for. And Theo was sufficient unto himself and would go no further than a little yearning, a little mooning, an occasional sentimental somersaulting of the fatty heart. *Only one of them mates...* Of the four, mass flighting after the queen, only one in fact had been a potential mate; and sure enough had died.

Of the three remaining—which might be capable of murder, only to prevent that mating?

Investigation, interrogation—the messages to Harrod’s, to Fortnum’s, to the chemist’s shop in the village; the telephone calls to Mr. Caxton’s lawyers, to Step-son Bill’s few contacts in America, to the departed domestic staff... The afternoon passed and the light summer evening came; and he stood with the four of them, out on the terrace of the big, ugly, anything-but-desirable residence which must now be Elizabeth’s own. ‘Elizabeth—Mrs. Caxton—and you three gentlemen... In this business there is only one conceivable motive. Money doesn’t come into it. The new will had been signed, Mr. Caxton’s death now or later made no difference to its contents. None of you appears to have been in any urgent financial need. So there’s only one motive, and therefore only one question: who would commit murder to prevent Cyrus Caxton from ever holding Elizabeth in his arms?’

Stout Theo?—who might yet have keen enough feelings, whose sick revulsion might be the more poignant because his own father had been involved. Or Step-son Bill?—who for this same unendurable thought of the beloved in the arms of another, could half-kill a man and cast off for ever the woman he still loved. Or the doctor?—who, of them all, had most closely known Elizabeth; who, as Cyrus Caxton’s medical adviser, knew only too intimately the gross body and crude appetites of the conquering male...

Theo, Bill, Dr. Ross. Out of these three... Softly, softly catchee monkey, said Inspector Cockrill to himself. Aloud he said: ‘This murder was a planned murder; nothing would have been left to chance. So why, I go on asking myself, should his first mouthful of peach have been the fatal one? And I answer myself: “Think about that spoon!” ’

‘You mean the spoon Theo was using to dish out the peaches?’ said Elizabeth quickly. ‘But no, because Theo didn’t hand the plate to his father. He couldn’t know which peach he’d get.’

‘Unless he directed a special plate to his father?’ suggested Bill, casting a quizzical glance at Inspector Cockrill. He reassured a suddenly quacking Theo. ‘O.K. pal, take it easy. We’ve already worked through that one.’

‘In any event, it wouldn’t account for the first mouthful being the poisoned one. And Elizabeth,’ said Inspector Cockrill severely, ‘please don’t go trying to put me off! That was a red-herring—to draw my attention away from the other spoon: the spoon handed directly to your husband by Master Bill here.’

She began to cry, drearily, helplessly, biting on the little white screwed-up ball of her handkerchief. ‘Inspector, Cyrus is dead, all this won’t bring him back. Couldn’t you—? Couldn’t we—?’ And she burst out that if it was all because of her, it was so dreadful for people to be in all this trouble....

‘But your husband has been murdered: what do you expect me to do, let it go at that, just because his murderer had a sentimental crush on you?’ He came back to the spoon. ‘If that spoon had been smeared with poison—’

She stopped crying at once, raised her head triumphantly. ‘It couldn’t have been. Cyrus looked at it to see that it was polished clean; he always did after the servants left, he said that I...’ The lower lip began to wobble again. ‘I know he’s dead; but he wasn’t very kind,’ she said.

Not Theo then: who could not have known that the poisoned peach would reach his father. Not Bill, who could not have poisoned the peach at all. ‘And so,’ said Dr. Ross, ‘you come to me?’

It was very quiet out there on the terrace; the sun had gone down now and soon the stars would be out, almost invisible in the pale evening sky. They stood, still and quiet also, and for a little while all were silent. Elizabeth said slowly: ‘Inspector—Dr. Ross has a wife of his own; and children.’

‘He still might not care for the vision of you in the arms of “that filthy old brute” as he has called him.’

‘That went for us all,’ said the doctor.

‘But it was you that went for Mr. Caxton, doctor—wasn’t it? Or *to* him, if you prefer. Went to him and put down his throat a finger protected by a rubber finger-stall.’

A finger-stall—thrust down the throat of a man having an everyday choking fit. A finger-stall dabbled in advance in a tin of poison.

‘You don’t believe this?’ said Dr. Ross, staring aghast. ‘You can’t believe it? Murder my own patient!’ Elizabeth caught his arm, crying out, ‘Of course he doesn’t mean it!’ but he ignored her. ‘And murder him in such a way! And anyway, how could I have known he would have a choking fit?’

‘He was always having choking fits,’ said Cockie.

‘But Dr. Ross couldn’t have *got* the poison,’ said Elizabeth. ‘It wasn’t he who fetched the bag from the hall.’ She broke off. ‘Oh, Theo, I didn’t intend—’

‘I got the bag,’ said Theo. ‘But that doesn’t mean anything.’

‘It could mean it was you who dabbled the finger-stall in the poison.’

Theo’s round face lost colour. ‘Me, Inspector? How could I have? How could I know anything about it? *I* don’t know what they use finger-stalls for and what they don’t.’

‘Anyway, he wouldn’t have had time,’ said Elizabeth. ‘Not to think it all out, undo the poison tin, find the finger-stall in the bag. Fingerstalls are kept in a side pocket, not floating about at the top of a medical bag.’

But in fact that was just where it had been: floating about at the top of the medical bag. Bill, crouching beside the doctor over the heaving body, had located it immediately and handed it to him. ‘I had used it on a patient

just before I came to the church,’ said Dr. Ross patiently. ‘You can check if you like. I threw it into boiling water, dried it and chucked it back into the bag. I was in a hurry to come to the wedding.’

In a hurry—to come to Elizabeth’s wedding. ‘So the finger-stall was in the fore-front of your mind then, doctor?—when you brought in your medical bag and put it down on the chair and your eye fell on that tin of poison. Everyone is milling about, just back from the ceremony, not thinking of anyone except the bride and bridegroom. You take a little scoop of the poison, using the finger-stall—just in case occasion arises. And occasion does arise. What a bit of luck!’

‘Inspector Cockrill,’ said Elizabeth steadily, ‘this is all nonsense. Dr. Ross smelt the stuff on Cyrus’s breath, long before he put the finger-stall down his throat. You saw him yourself, like I said, sort of—snuffing...’

‘Sort of snuffing at nothing,’ said Cockie. ‘There was nothing to snuff at, was there, doctor?—not yet. But it placed the poison, you see, in advance of the true poisoning with the finger-stall. The man chokes, the doctor leans over him, pretends to be suspicious. *Then* the finger-stall down the throat; and this time there *is* something to snuff at. And when the finger-stall is later examined, the fact of its having been down the man’s throat will account for traces of cyanide on it. Now all that remains is to pin-point the earlier source of the poison. Well, that’s easy: he wipes off the finger-stall on the napkin; and then, so innocently!—places the napkin over the peach.’ His bright eyes, bird-like, looked triumphantly round upon them.

They all stood rigid, staring at the doctor: horrified, questioning. Elizabeth cried out: ‘Oh, it isn’t true!’ but on a note of doubt.

‘I don’t think so, no,’ said Cockie. ‘This isn’t a crime where anything was left to chance. And this is based on the chance that the old man might have a choking fit.’

She went over to the doctor, put her two little hands on his arm, laid her forehead for a moment against his shoulder in a gesture devoid of coquetry. ‘Oh, thank God! He frightened me.’

‘He didn’t frighten me,’ said Dr. Ross stoutly; but he looked all the same exceedingly pale. To Cockrill he said: ‘He got these choking fits, yes: but—once or twice in a year. You couldn’t risk all that on the chance of his having one.’

‘So that brings us back to you, Theo,’ said Inspector Cockrill blandly. ‘Who gave him peaches in Kirsch and *made* him have one.’

Theo looked as likely as his father had ever done, to have a choking fit. ‘*I made him have one?*’

‘My dear Theo! A man is a rabid teetotaller. You provide him with a peach in a thick syrup of Kirsch—observing that he has a heavy cold and won’t smell the liqueur in advance. He takes a great gulp of it and realises that he’s been tricked into taking alcohol. You knew your father: he would go off into one of his spluttering rages and if he didn’t choke on the peach, he’d choke on his own spluttering. And it isn’t true, is it? that you didn’t know about choking fits, and how the air-passages may be freed with a finger, covered with a finger-stall. You must have seen your father in these attacks at least once or twice; he’d been having them for years.’

He began to splutter himself. ‘I couldn’t have done it. Gone out into the hall, you mean, to get the bag, and put the stuff on the finger-stall then? Elizabeth showed that earlier; I wouldn’t have had time.’

‘We were all preoccupied, getting your father out of his chair and lowered on to the floor. The seconds pass quickly.’

But she couldn’t bear it for Theo, either. ‘Don’t listen to him, Theo, don’t be frightened! This is no more true than the other theory. He’s—he’s sort of teasing us; needling us, trying to make us say something. If Theo did

it, Inspector, what about Dr. Ross? Why should he have sniffed at Cyrus's breath, when he was lying back in the chair? There would have been nothing to smell, yet. You say he was pretending; but if it was Theo who put the poison on the fingerstall—why should the doctor have pretended? Unless...' She broke off, clapped her hand to her mouth; took it away immediately, began to fiddle unconcernedly with the handkerchief. Inspector Cockrill said: 'Yes, Elizabeth? Unless—?'

'Nothing,' said Elizabeth. 'I just mean that the doctor wouldn't have put on an act if it had been Theo who'd done it.'

Unless He thought about it and his eyes were brilliant as stars.

'Unless, Elizabeth, you were going to say—unless they were in it together.' And he looked round at the three of them and smiled with the smile of a tiger. 'Unless they were all three in it together.'

Three men—united: united in loving the same woman, united in not wishing actually to possess her; united in determination, however, that a fourth man should not.

The first casual exchange of thought, of feeling, of their common disgust and dread; the first casual discussion of some sort of action, some sort of rescue, the vague threats, hardening into determination, into hard fact, into realistic plotting. But—murder! Even backed up by the rest—which one of them would positively commit murder? And, none accepting—divide the deed, then, amongst them: as in an execution, where a dozen men fire the bullets, no one man kills.

Bill's task to acquire the poison, see that it remains available in the hall. Theo's task to ensure, as far as possible, that a chance arises to use the poisoned finger-stall. The doctor, of course, actually to employ it. But lest that seem too heavy a share of the guilt for any one partner to carry, let Theo be the one to go out into the hall and poison the finger-stall; let Bill

take the bag from him, hand the poisoned thing to the doctor. Executioners: does he who administers the poison, kill more than he who procures it?—does he who presents the victim to the murderer, kill the less because he does not do the actual slaying? All for one and one for all! And all for the purity of Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen.

Elizabeth stood with him, weeping, in the hall, while a sergeant herded the three men into the huge, hideous drawing-room and kept them there till the police car should come. ‘I don’t believe it: I utterly don’t believe it, Inspector. Those three? A plot—’

He had said it long ago: from the very beginning. ‘A very deep-laid, elaborate, absolutely sure-fire plan.’

‘Between the doctor and Theo then, if you must. But Bill—why drag Bill into it?’

‘Ah, Bill,’ he said. ‘But without Bill...? You have been very loyal; but I think we must now come into the open about Bill?’

And he was back with her, so many weeks ago now, when Cyrus Caxton’s proposed new marriage had first become an open secret. ‘With your job, Elizabeth, you could travel, you could see the world.’ ‘I *have* seen the world,’ she had answered. ‘All right,’ she admitted now, in a small voice. ‘Yes. I did go to America, with a private patient. I did get married there. Cyrus knew that I’d been married and divorced. I didn’t tell other people because he didn’t like anyone knowing that I was—well, he called it second-hand.’

Married; and divorced. Married to one who ‘bumming around’ had heard through the devoted family servants that his mother’s illness would be her last. ‘Inspector, we were desperate. He wouldn’t work, he gambled like a maniac, my nursing wouldn’t keep the two of us. And yet I couldn’t leave him. I told you that I had had a lost love; well, that was true in its own

way. My love he was—and yet not lost really after all: my love he is still and to my ruin ever shall be. I suppose some women are like that.’

‘And some men,’ said Cockie; thinking of that suddenly desolate look with which he had said, ‘I think now that I made some pretty big mistakes.’

‘I’ve been so ashamed, Inspector,’ she said, weeping again. ‘Not only of what we were doing; but of all the lies, all the acting.’

‘Yet you went through with it.’

‘You don’t know Bill,’ she said. ‘But yes—it’s true. He wrote to his mother secretly, through the servants. He said a girl would get in touch with her, a wonderful nurse, who would soon be coming over to England. He told her to say nothing to the old man but to try to get this girl engaged to look after her; of course the girl was me, Inspector. The idea at first was simply to look after his interests, to try to get his mother’s money ensured to him, before she died. But then he got this other idea. The old man would soon be a widower; and he thought of him as a very old man, old and, he knew, in bad health. He hadn’t seen his step-father for years; to an adolescent, all adults seem far more aged than they are. He imagined an old crock far more in need of a nurse than of a wife. So—the first thing was a divorce. He beat up a man whom he accused of having an affair with me; he over-did that a bit and landed himself in prison; but even that he didn’t mind, it helped in speeding up the divorce because of the reason for the assault.’

‘Without a divorce, you couldn’t have inherited, of course. The marriage with the old man had to be water-tight.’

‘Inspector,’ she said, in anguish, ‘don’t believe for one moment that this began as a murder plot. It started from small beginnings, as I’ve said; and then in that gambler’s mind of his, it just grew and grew. Here was this golden chance. He knew that I had this—this power over men; something

that I just have, I can't help it, you've seen for yourself how, without any effort on my part, it works. With such an asset—how could he bear not to exploit it? A sick old man, recently widowed, a pretty little nurse already installed: how could it fail?’

‘And he was prepared to wait?’

‘He saw the thing in terms of a year or two, no longer. Meanwhile he would remain in England, we could see one another—after all, he was a member of the family. And I would provide him with money, I suppose; and he would gamble.’

‘But before this happy condition of things, you must nurse the dying mother; and then get to work succeeding in her place with the widower.’

She turned away her head. ‘I know you think it sounds terrible; put that way, it seems terrible to me too—and it always has done. But—well, of course I had only Bill's picture of the situation, the picture of an ailing old man who would want a—a nurse rather than a wife... And when I found out differently—well, once again, you don't know Bill. What Bill says, you have to do. And I did nurse her: she was dying, I couldn't make any difference to that, but I did nurse her and care for her—almost her last words were of gratitude to me. When she died, I could hardly bear it. I rang up Bill in America and told him I couldn't go through with it. But... Well, he just said—’

‘He said you *must* go through with it: and came over here himself, to make sure that you did?’

‘To make sure of that—and of something else?’ she said, faintly.

‘Yes,’ he said, thinking it over. ‘Of something else too. Because he's still in love with you, Elizabeth, in his own way. And he might drive you to the altar with a horrible old man; but he would never let you get as far as the old man's bed.’

And in that determination, he had found unexpected allies. ‘I suppose, Inspector, he may have meant to do it himself—God knows, he never to me breathed a word of such a thing. As I say, back in the States, he was visualising this old-man-and-nurse relationship. But anyway, he’s a gambler, here was this chance and nothing must stand in the way of it. Then he came over here and saw me again: and saw me with his stepfather... And then, perhaps, finding how the other two felt about it, I suppose he roped them in. Another gambler’s chance: so typical of Bill. Only this one will come off for a change, because in this way the law can’t do anything to them?’

‘How do you mean?—can’t do anything?’

‘Well, but—who has committed any crime? Bill has bought a tin of stuff for killing wasps: there’s nothing wrong in that? Theo has bought a bottle of peaches—nothing wrong in that either? The doctor—well, I suppose he did put the finger-stall down Cyrus’s throat. But *he* didn’t poison it. None of them has actually done one wrong action. They can’t even be put in prison?’

‘Only for a very short time,’ acknowledged Cockie.

‘For a short time?’ she said, startled.

‘Till they’re taken out and hanged,’ said Inspector Cockrill.

‘You don’t truly mean that? All three of them could be—executed?’

‘All three,’ said Cockie. ‘For being concerned in a murder: that’s the law. The flight of the queen, Elizabeth—*at certain times of the year the drones sit around eating*—well, we saw them do that—and *gazing with huge eyes upon the virgin queen*—well, we saw them do that too. And then, *the mass flight after the queen*: and that also we’ve seen. But here something goes wrong with the comparison; because only one succeeds in the mating; and therefore—only one dies.’

‘You mean that these three—?’

‘I mean that these three are not going to die. It would be too inartistic an ending to the metaphor.’

‘What can save them?’ said Elizabeth, beginning to tremble.

‘Words can save them: and will save them.’

‘Words?’

‘A dozen words: carelessly spoken, hardly listened to, attended to not at all. Except by me when later I remembered them. Your husband saying, “Why couldn’t I have had smoked salmon?” and you replying, “We got what was easiest.”’ A plain-clothes man who had all this time sat quietly on a chair by the front door, got up, as quietly, and came forward; and Inspector Cockrill shot out a hand and circled, with steely hard fingers, her narrow wrist. ‘Why should oysters have been easier than smoked salmon, Elizabeth?’ he said.

A very elaborate, long-thought-out, deep-laid, absolutely sure-fire plan...

The ugly collusion between husband and wife, to implant in the household of the dying mother a new bride for the rich widower soon to be. On the husband’s part, probably nothing more—nothing worse intended than an impatient waiting from then on, for the end of a life whose expectations had been somewhat underestimated. On hers—ah! she had been on the spot to recognise in advance the long years she might yet have to serve with a man who at the least sign of rebellion would pare down her inheritance to the limit the law allowed. Had she really confessed to Cyrus Caxton an earlier marriage? Not likely! ‘You are well named Elizabeth—the virgin queen,’ he had said; and added, ‘I hope!’ Of them all, the one who had had most cause to dread Mr. Caxton’s marriage bed had been Elizabeth herself.

The plot then, laid: but in one mind alone. Use the ex-husband, expendable now, as red-herring number one; ensnare with enchantments long proved irresistible, such other poor fools as might serve to confuse the issue. With gentle persistence, no injury pin-pointable, alienate servants too long faithful and now in the way. And, the scene set, sit, sweet and smiling, little hands fluttering, soft eyes mistily blue—and in the back of one's scheming mind, think and think and plan and plan...

'You can't know,' she said, spitting it out at him, as they drove away from the house, the three men left sick and bewildered, utterly confounded, watching her go: sitting between himself and his sergeant in the smooth black police car, ceaselessly, restlessly struggling against their grip on her wrists. 'You don't know. It's all a trick, trying to lead me up the garden path.'

'No,' said Cockrill. 'Not any more. We've been up enough garden paths: with you leading *me*.' His arm gave slackly against the tug and pull of her hand, but his fingers never left their firm hold. 'How well you did it!—poking the clues under my nose, snatching each of them back when you saw it wasn't going to work—and all with such a touching air of protecting your poor dear admirers, fallen into this terrible trap, for love of you. But I matched you,' he said with quiet satisfaction, 'trick for trick.'

'You can't know,' she repeated again.

'I knew from the first moment,' he said. 'From the first moment I remembered his asking why he couldn't have had smoked salmon. *You* ordered the meal: accuse who you will—whatever you had said about the meal, that would have been decided. So why give him oysters; which would only make him angry? If one thought about it—taking all the other factors into consideration—the answer had to be there.'

‘But the tin! You saw it yourself when we came into the dining-room. I never left the dining-room—how could I have hidden it in the vase?’

‘You hid it when you went out to “look”; it wouldn’t take half a second and you had your little hankie in your hand, didn’t you?—all ready to muffle your finger-prints.’ And with his free hand he smote his knee. ‘By gum!—you’d thought this thing out, hadn’t you?—right down to the last little shred of a handkerchief.’

She struggled, sitting there between them, ceaselessly wrenching to ease their grip on her wrists. ‘Let me go, you brutes! You’re hurting me.’

‘Cyrus Caxton didn’t have too comfortable a time, a-dying.’

‘That old hog!’ she said, viciously. ‘Who cares how such an animal dies?’

‘As long as he dies.’

‘You’ll never prove that I killed him, Inspector. How, for example,’ she said, triumphantly, subsiding a little in her restless jerking to give her whole mind to it, ‘how could I have taken the poison from the tin?’

‘You could have taken it while you were in the house with Theo, on the way to the church. Theo went off to the downstairs cloakroom—’

‘For half a minute. How long does a man take, nipping into the loo? To get the stuff out of the tin, do all the rest of it—’

‘Ah, but I don’t say you did “do all the rest of it”—not then. “All the rest of it” had been prepared in advance. We’ll find—if we look long enough; and we will—some chemist in London where you bought a second tin of cyanide. The tin here was a blind; there was time enough even during Theo’s half-minute, to take a quick scoop out of it (no doubt you’d arranged to have it left on the hall table)—just as a blind. That lot, I suppose, you disposed of in the cloak-room when you went there, after Theo.’

‘You know it all, don’t you?’ she said, sarcastically; but she was growing weary, helpless, she had ceased to struggle, sitting limply between them now, slumped against the seatback.

A very deep-laid, elaborate, absolutely sure-fire plot: and all to be conceived in the mind of one little woman—a woman consumed, destroyed, by the dangerous knowledge of her own invincibility in the hearts of men. But the cleverness, thought Cockie; the patience! The long preparation, the building-up, piece by piece, of the ‘book’ itself, the stage-props, the make-up, the scenery: as a producer will work long months ahead on a projected production. Then—the stage set at last, the puppet actors chosen: curtain up! The ‘exposition’—‘Bill, for goodness sake collect the things from the chemist for me, the old man will slay me if I don’t get his wretched wasp stuff. Just leave it on the hall table, let him think I got it...’ And, ‘Theo, I’ve ordered the stuff from Harrod’s, but I never thought about a dessert. You couldn’t hop across to Fortnum’s and get some of those peaches-in-Kirsch?—I’ve seen them there and they look so delicious. Teetotal?—oh, lord, so he is! But still, why should everyone else suffer?—perhaps this will make up to them for having no champagne. And he’s got his usual fearful cold, may be he won’t even notice.’ In the excitement and confusion, who would remember accurately, who would carry in their heads, all the commands and counter-commands, all the myriad unimportant small decisions, and who had made them? Who, for that matter, of her three cavaliers, would shelter behind her skirts to cry out, ‘It was Elizabeth who told me to.’ So Bill introduces the poison into the house, and Theo the peach which is to be found guilty of conveying the poison; and if the doctor does not bring in his medical bag, then busy little Elizabeth, ex-nurse, will be there to remind him of police exhortations. The stage set; the cast assembled; the puppet actors (Inspector Cockrill himself included to do the observing)—moved

this way and that at the twitch of a thread, held in a small hand already dyed red with the victim's blood.

For even as he swallowed his last oyster, munched his way resentfully through his cold meat, began on his peach—already Cyrus Caxton had been a dying man: had not the doctor smelt the cyanide upon his breath? 'Why couldn't you have got smoked salmon?' he had asked angrily: and, after all, smoked salmon could have been sent down from Harrod's as easily as oysters. But 'We got what was easiest,' she had replied; and even then, Inspector Cockrill had asked himself—why? Why should oysters, which require cut lemon, a little red pepper and perhaps some brown bread and butter, have been easier than smoked salmon which requires just the same?

Answer: because you cannot conceal a capsule of poison as easily in a plate of smoked salmon, as you can in a dozen oysters.

A man who likes oysters will retain them in his mouth, will chumble them a little, gently, savouring their peculiar delight for him. A man who does not care for oysters—and Mr. Caxton was not one to make concessions—will swallow them down whole and be done with it.

Cyrus Caxton had had a heavy cold, he was always having colds and the house was full of specifics against the colds, though he would not touch any of them. Among the specifics would certainly be found bottles of small capsules of slow-dissolving gelatine, filled with various compounds of drugs. A capsule emptied out might be filled with just so much of the preparation of cyanide as would kill a man. An oyster, slit open with a sharp knife, might form just such a pocket as would accommodate the capsule and close over it again.

No time of course, as she had truly said, to have achieved it all in the brief moment available when she and Theo had visited the house. But an oyster bar would be found in London, if Cockie searched long enough—

where a little, blue-eyed woman had yesterday treated herself to a dozen oysters: and left behind her, if anyone had troubled to count them, only eleven shells. A small plastic bag, damp with liquor from the oyster, would no doubt have also been got rid of in the downstairs cloakroom. For the rest—it wouldn't have taken a moment to duck into the dining-room (Theo having been sent off like a small boy to the loo 'in case he started hopping in church') and replace one oyster with another, on Cyrus Caxton's plate.

Ten minutes later Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, had given her hand to a man who within that hour and by that same hand, to her certain knowledge would no longer be alive; and had promised before God to love, cherish and keep him till death did them part.

Well, if there was an after-life, reflected Inspector Cockrill coming away from the Old Bailey a couple of months later, at least they would be soon re-united.

Meanwhile, he must remember to look up hornets; and see whether the queens, also, have a sting.

¹*And so should the reader*

Poison in the Cup

THE GIRL MUST HAVE been leaning with her full weight against the door, for when Stella opened it, she almost fell into the hall. She said: 'I've taken an overdose of morphia.'

Panic rose in Stella's breast. What did one do? What were the proper steps to take? A doctor's wife for fifteen years, and still she didn't know. She had closed her mind to it, she loathed it all so much, the dreary people with their sicknesses and miseries, trailing up her garden path, taking up the two best rooms on the ground floor. She dragged the girl into the surgery, heaved her into the one armchair. 'My husband's out.' But she could ring Frederick. 'I'll get hold of his partner,' she said.

The girl lay with closed eyes in the big chair: a small, ginger-haired creature with leaden eyelids and a slack, pink mouth. Her legs, sprawled before her, were exquisitely shapely and yet unattractively large for her small body. The tiny, rather grubby little hands lay laxly in her lap. Was she already sliding into coma? Ought one to be wasting time on telephone calls, ought one not to be administering emetics, antidotes...?

Frederick was not in. She crashed back the receiver in despair. The hospital!—she ought first to have thought of ringing the hospital direct. Only for heaven's sake, what was the damn number? And she thought again, groping blindly for the telephone directory, I don't even know the number of my husband's own hospital....

And so observed the small hand, surreptitiously moving, surreptitiously hoicking up a stocking, pulled askew by her stumbling passage through the hall, no doubt, and now cutting uncomfortably across

her plump white thigh. And all of a sudden, Stella knew. She said: 'You're that girl, Nurse Kelly, from the hospital!'

The girl opened her eyes and gave her a small, sweet, sly smile. She said: 'I suppose you're his wife?' Her voice was a little, dying-away murmur.

Stella left the telephone and came and stood over her. 'And you haven't taken morphia at all—have you? This is all just a laid-on drama. You've come merely to make a scene.'

The girl smiled again, that sly little, faintly mocking, secret smile. She said nothing.

Stella caught at her arm, jerking the lolling figure upright. 'There's no use giving *me* enigmatic glances, my dear. I'm not a man, I'm not impressed. You haven't taken morphia or anything else and you can now get up and trot ignominiously back to the hospital.' She gave the soft, slack arm another jerk. 'Come on—get out!'

The girl dragged her arm free and lay back in the chair again, looking up at her spitefully from under her pale, reddish eyebrows. She said: 'What will Richard say?' and added in her silly, faint dying-away voice: 'You know he and I are in love?'

'I know you've been pursuing him round the hospital ever since you came there,' said Stella. 'But all doctors get that kind of thing and I'm sorry if I disillusion you, but you've been nothing to Ricky but a bloody bore. All these ringings-up in phoney voices, all these sloppy little notes....My dear girl, my husband is fifteen years older than you are, he's married, he's a very busy man—he hardly even knows you exist.'

The girl had been leaning back in the chair quietly listening. Now she opened her eyes. She said: 'Of course you'd be the last to know, wouldn't you?' and closed her eyes again.

It was all no use: just a silly, obstinate, hysterical little bitch, trying to make herself interesting. Stella lost all patience. 'All right, have it your own way; but now I'm bored with you, as bored as Richard is. Will you kindly get up and get out of my house.'

The girl said in her dying-away voice which yet was half-mockingly triumphant: 'But I'm going to have a baby,' and pulled aside the cheap little, tarty little coat for a moment, and softly folded it again over her body.

Stella sat down on the edge of the examination couch and for a moment gave herself over to a sick despair. For what a muddle, what a sordid, endless, desperately damaging muddle might not this dreadful little creature land them all in, to satisfy her craving for notice. A doctor....And the wretched girl had been, in some sort, his patient; he had attended her for a couple of days up at the hospital for a poisoned finger—that was, in fact, how all this nonsense had begun. But if she'd been his patient—then that meant the attentive interest of the General Medical Council....And the girl was undeniably pregnant. A physical nausea rose up in her at the thought of the gossip to come, the leering eyes and the whispering tongues, the goggling excitement of the hospital staff, the no-smoke-without-fire routine; the ceaseless threat from the girl herself of scenes and dramas and collapses and recurrent phoney suicides. Marriage to Ricky had been dull enough in all conscience; but now how precious it began to seem in its monotonous security. For what if patients began to fall off, if poverty and struggle came to be added again, as in the old days of their building up of the practice, to the dreary round of surgeries and night calls and cancelled parties and always-arriving-late....I couldn't face it, she thought; I couldn't go back to the scraping and saving, the petty economies, the cheeky tradesmen, the little, niggling, mounting debts....But if this girl persisted in this charge of hers....

There was a step in the hall and Frederick Graham, Ricky's partner, came into the surgery:

Ricky would have stood for a moment, rather helpless, hesitant, diffident; but Frederick, the debonair, just lifted a devil's eyebrow and said with his easy smile that he was sorry, he hadn't realised there was anyone here....

If this stupid little bitch had had to fasten upon one or other of them, why couldn't it have been Frederick?—who, after all, was ten times more glamorous, surely, than poor, self-effacing, quiet Richard. Frederick was a bachelor and consequently far less susceptible to this kind of blackmail. And yet... After all, he *was* a bachelor; and in that case....Like a sick thrust into her heart came the knowledge that she couldn't have borne that: the thought of Frederick in the arms of this creamy-soft, sleechy-soft little creature. For many months now, when the hum-drum of life with Richard had become too much to bear, she had titillated herself by pretending that she and Frederick....The truth is, she thought, that I'm no better than this miserable little strumpet here. But at least she had made no scenes, played out no dramas—Frederick had no more idea of her day-dreams than had Ricky himself.

The girl in the chair opened her eyes and gazed up starrily at Frederick. 'I know you! You're Mr. Graham, the surgeon.' She added in a silly, baby voice: 'I'm Ann.'

Frederick drew his brows together in one of his quick black frowns. 'It's Nurse Kelly from the hospital, isn't it? What's she doing here?' But the truth began to dawn. He said: 'Not still chasing after Ricky?'

'She and he are going to have a darling little baby—' said Stella.

'Oh, for heavens' sake—!'

'—and she's taken an overdose of morphia: can you imagine?'

He nicked the girl over with a sharp, professional eye. ‘Morphia? How long ago?’

‘Before I left the hospital,’ said Ann Kelly, defiantly.

‘She’s been here fifteen minutes or so,’ said Stella. ‘In such a state of coma when she arrived that I had to half carry her in. So I suppose that would tally.’ She added with triumphant sarcasm that under the circumstances her present state of liveliness was interesting, wasn’t it?

‘Liveliness is a symptom in the initial stages,’ said the girl, temporarily coming-to to defend herself.

‘Not by the hour, my dear: even I know that. And you’ve forgotten to be dry and thirsty.’

‘*And* to have pin-point pupils,’ said Frederick, bending over her and lifting an eyelid before she could prevent him. He straightened himself. ‘Now then—what’s all this nonsense about?’

The girl slowly opened her coat again and again folded it about her. ‘Richard Harrison’s the father,’ she said. She rolled her head towards Stella. ‘Naturally, *she* won’t believe it.’

‘Neither will anyone else,’ said Frederick; but the threat about the morphia allayed, he had time to consider the situation more closely. Stella saw the quick frown, the tiny shock, the immediate acceptance of all that this might yet mean to them—to herself and Richard, to himself, to the practice.

‘I shall have to try to convince them, shan’t I?’ said the soft little voice.

And Ricky was there: standing in the doorway with his doubtful look, his self-deprecating air, that air of quietness and simplicity.... ‘What on earth—? Good Lord! What’s *she* doing here?’

‘Oh, Richard,’ sighed Ann Kelly, and toppled forward out of the chair and lay huddled at his feet.

Stella lost her temper. ‘Oh, my God!—the play-acting little bitch!’ As the two men stooped to raise the girl, she thrust them aside. ‘Leave her alone! There’s nothing on earth wrong with her, last time she did this I could see her surreptitiously hoicking up her stocking; she’s no more fainted than I have.’ And she said, viciously, shrilly that if only the silly bitch knew how awful she looked, with her skirt all rucked up and her legs at silly angles, she’d get up now of her own accord and not continue to present to her dear Richard so unlovely a display of not very clean under clothes. As the girl, sure enough, began to try to struggle back to the chair, she explained: ‘She’s come here with some drama about having taken a lethal dose of morphia; and you are the father of her chee-ild.’

‘Oh, my God!’ said Ricky as if he could stand not one moment more of it.

‘Never mind, my dear, it’s all a damn bore but it’s no worse than that. She’s got herself into a jam and the only way out is to make herself into an interesting little martyr. Just take no notice and nobody else will.’

‘We’ll see about that,’ said the girl.

Ricky stood looking down at her miserably. ‘Surely you don’t want to ruin me?’

‘If I’m to be dragged through the mud,’ said the girl, ‘I want to know you’re there with me.’

‘There’ll be no mud, if only you won’t be foolish.’

‘But I want mud,’ said the girl. ‘I revel in mud. I want to see you wallowing in it, because you’ve been cold and unkind, and thrown aside my love as though it meant nothing. And her too—she’s been very clever and managing this evening, seeing through all my poor little defences, so sure of herself, sneering at me, mocking me—but I have the whip hand, and I’ll use it, I’ll pay her back for every sneer and every taunt, you see if I don’t!’

Exhausted with spite she leaned back in the chair again and closed her eyes; and on her lips was that sly little, evil, sweet smile.

Ricky disregarded this outburst. He stood looking down at her dispassionately: or, thought Stella, irritated, almost with pity. He said: 'You haven't really taken morphia. *Have* you?'

'I have—enough to kill me.'

'How long ago, then?'

'Just before I left the hospital. I took it from the poison cupboard on B. ward. You can ring up and ask them, if you like, I left a note saying I'd stolen it.'

'And telling them why?' said Frederick: all casual.

'Of course not. I wouldn't let you down,' she said to Ricky, fluttering her eyelids. 'No one knows.' But she added with an evil look at Stella: 'Not yet.'

Ricky leaned forward, as Frederick had done, put a hand to her wrist, lifted her lip with a thumb to observe the moist gums and tongue, pulled down an eyelid. She wriggled and smirked beneath his touch but he might have been a veterinary surgeon examining a doubtful sheep or cow. 'Well—you definitely have not taken anything.' To Stella, he said: 'I must go. I only dropped in for ten minutes smoke and a cup of tea between my patient's labour pains. She'd better just be got back to the hospital; but give her something first—a cup of something hot, coffee would be best, strong and black and plenty of sugar.' He hesitated. 'Freddie—would you mind seeing her back?'

'No, of course. I think someone should see that she gets up to no tricks....'

Frederick seeing her back to the hospital....Leading her in, the heroine, pathetic or triumphant as best suited her; staging collapses, noisy outbursts

about cruel Mrs. Harrison, yelling her bitchy little head off about Richard getting her into trouble, giving her a baby... Angrily boiling up the kettle in the kitchen, Stella thought with black despair that peace of mind was gone for ever: nothing, nothing would stop this girl. If one act failed, another would take its place; they would find her hanging about their door, besieging the houses of patients or friends, following Ricky about the hospital, making scenes in the wards Matron would bundle her off no doubt, at last; but the damage would be done by then. No use to plead, to appeal, to threaten, to command—the girl was lost to shame, beyond control; having nothing to lose, was in the strongest position of all. I wish to God she *had* taken morphia, thought Stella, pouring boiling water over the heaped coffee in the jug. Much I'd have done to bring her back to life! For two pins, I'd give her the damn dose myself! And straight upon the idle thought—formulate, positive, determination born complete and mature from the womb of necessity, it came—the knowledge of what she must do. Her heart reeled, her hands were clammy and cold, but without hesitation or remorse she recognised what was to be. Ann Kelly had told all the world that she had taken an overdose of morphia, that she wanted to die. Well, so she should.

A curtain descended between two distinct halves of her mind: the half that felt and the half that acted. All so easy, all so safe, so obvious. The note to the hospital authorities would be produced at the inquest; if morphia proved not to be missing from the hospital cupboard, it would be assumed that she had got it in some other way. The girl was hysterical, unbalanced, an exhibitionist; and in the family way. One more suicide by one more little psychopath; and no one, she had said, had been told the story about Richard Harrison being the father of the child....

Cool, decisive, without further reflection, she walked through to the surgery. 'Ricky, I think you'd better take her through to the drawing room. We don't want anyone to come in and find her here.' She gave the two men no time to argue, hustled them, half dragging the girl, through to the other room. 'Sit her down on the sofa. The coffee won't be half a minute.' She closed the drawing-room door behind her and, swiftly unlocking the cupboard in the surgery, took out the bottle of morphine tablets.

How many? She emptied half a dozen of the tiny pills into her hand, replaced the bottle, locked the cupboard and replaced the key. Back in the kitchen, she gave herself not a moment to reconsider: dropped the tablets into the cup, poured on the coffee, hot and strong, stirred in abundant sugar—walked through to the drawing room and thrust it under the girl's nose. 'Come on—drink this!'

The girl pushed it aside. 'I don't want it.'

'*Drink it!*' said Stella. The men looked up uneasily, half shocked by the vicious determination in her voice. The girl took the cup and drank, sipping it slowly, till all but a spoonful of dregs remained. Stella took the cup from her and went back with it into the kitchen; once there, she rinsed it out with scalding water, carefully preserving, however, the lipstick on the rim and the girl's finger-prints and her own on the outside: stirred the coffee in the pot, poured into the cup just enough of the muddy deposit, left the cup on the draining-board of the sink and went back into the drawing-room. The whole thing had taken not half a minute. She said, taking care to preserve the irritable scorn of her manner, 'I trust you're now better?' and could stand aside and wonder at her own grim determination; the subservience of her feeling self to the dictates of that remorseless, curtained-off other half of her mind.

They all stood looking down at the girl, Frederick impatient, Ricky on the hop because he ought long ago to have gone back to his case, Stella ice-cold and yet with a fluttering at her innermost heart. For now the other side of her mind had begun to work again, to admit the possibility of danger, the necessity to plan, to calculate. If the girl went back to the hospital now, they would soon enough see that she had indeed taken morphia and would deal with her accordingly. And to have her life saved now would make matters worse a hundredfold than they had been before, for the girl, conscious of no genuine attempt to administer poison to herself, would become aware that someone else had done it for her. And then—what a story would she not indeed have to relate?—confirmed by the fact that no morphia in fact would be found missing from the hospital. Or if she kept silent it would appear all a genuine attempt at suicide—since in view of her condition the dose would be diagnosed as a lethal one—and far more credence would be given to any story she chose to tell. No: the first step had been taken and from that there could be no going back. I am a murderess, thought Stella: a murderess—and from the very first step of my murder I am committed. I can't turn back.

She took another sudden resolution: drew the two men away and into the dining-room end. 'Do you think we're wise, after all, to let her go straight back to the hospital? Would it be better to keep her here for the night? I could ring up and make it all right with Matron: tell her some tarradiddle. In the morning the girl will be more rational, we can talk sense to her. Don't you think that for her to arrive back, late at night, in triumph, having made a lovely scene at Dr. Harrison's house, would be a mistake? Yank her back in the cold, clear light of morning and let Matron have her on the carpet. Meanwhile, I'll make up the bed in the spare room and we can let her sleep off the whole affair.'

‘I believe you may be right,’ said Frederick. ‘Only in that case it’s a pity we gave her the black coffee.’ He glanced over towards the sofa. ‘She seems to be considerably woken-up already.’ (These must be the first signs, the restless, voluble symptoms before the coma set in. Time was growing very short.)

Ricky glanced for the hundredth time at his watch. ‘I simply must go. Yes, I think this is best, Stella. Everything looks clearer by daylight and I’ll go to Matron myself and sort it out with her. She’s a good soul!’ He turned back to the lolling figure on the sofa. ‘Look here, my wife thinks you’d better stay here for the night and then we can talk things over in the morning, more calmly. It’s a pity you had the coffee but I’ll give you something to counteract that and you can have a good sleep; then you’ll feel better.’ He gave her no time to argue but went through to the surgery and returned with half a dozen small white pills. ‘Give her these, Stella, with a drop of warm milk.’ He rolled them out of his cupped hand on to the high mantelpiece.

‘Six?’ said Frederick, looking at them a bit doubtfully.

‘It’s only that Restuwel stuff; they’re quite mild and she’s had all that coffee. Now I must rush.’ He gave not a backward glance at the girl but hurried off out of the door. They heard the car engine purr into life outside.

‘They’ll think it very peculiar, won’t they?’ said the cool, sweet voice from the sofa ‘—you keeping me here for the night. I suppose they’ll think Mrs. Harrison didn’t want it to come out about my trying to commit suicide because I was having a baby by her husband: and they gave me antidotes and things and kept me here till I was all right again.’

‘An impression you would do nothing to correct, would you?’ said Frederick, savagely sardonic.

‘Of course not,’ said Ann Kelly: smiling her little smile.

Stella's self-control fell away from her, suddenly, as though her clothes had ripped apart and fallen, leaving her naked. 'You utter little bitch! You vile, filthy, lying, blackmailing utter little bitch!' She stood over the girl, dreadfully shaking, one hand clenched as though she would hit out at her. Frederick caught her shoulder and pulled her away and she collapsed against him, lying convulsed with great, shuddering sobs, against his breast. 'Oh, Frederick! Oh, God, Frederick, it's all so vile, so terrifying, so horrible....' Vile and terrifying and horrible to have this cool, smiling, taunting little face lifted to hers like an evil white flower; to know that soon it would smile its sneering little smile no more....To be unmoved by that knowledge; to know oneself suddenly not human any longer, not capable of ordinary human pity or remorse....

Frederick held her close, strong, reassuring, kind. 'Hush, my dear, hush, don't upset yourself, don't let it get you down. You've been marvellous, love, you've handled the whole thing perfectly, and you'll see, it'll all be all right in the morning.' He held her away from him, pulled out a handkerchief, dabbed at her livid, tear-stained face. 'Come on, dry up those lovely blue eyes of yours; it isn't as bad as all that.'

She leaned her head for a moment, just for a moment, against that firm, kind shoulder; revelling uncontrollably in her first physical contact with him, drowned for a moment in the first revelation of his tenderness. 'Oh, Frederick—!'

'Oh, Frederick....!' mimicked the soft little, sneering voice.

They moved apart sharply, as though a sword had been cleft between them. Stella cast one venomous glance at the sofa and went out of the room. 'I'll ring Matron.'

Matron seemed only mildly surprised to learn that Nurse Kelly was at Dr. Harrison's house. 'Has there been any drama at the hospital, Matron?

She says she left a note saying she'd taken some morphia—'

'Yes, there was some rubbish of that sort,' said Matron. 'But the poisons are all accounted for and I'm getting a bit used to the young lady's tricks—not to say fed up with them. Why did she come to you?'

'Well, you know she's supposed to have a crush on my poor husband?'
(Better to be casually frank....)

'They all do this kind of thing,' said Matron, comfortably. 'It hasn't prevented her going around with one of the housemen.'

'You know she's going to have a baby?'

'Oh,' said Matron rather flatly. She added: 'Are you sure?'

'When she really shows you—'

'I suppose I ought to have spotted it,' said Matron. 'Well, tomorrow I shall send the young lady packing. Him too, if I had anything to do with it but I don't.'

'Him?'

'Well, young Bates is obviously the father. They've been very thick, and there's been nobody else.'

Obviously the father....! All for nothing—a murderess and all for nothing: the whole ugly threat dissipated into gossamer. In this new light, Stella saw that any suggestion against Ricky would have been brushed aside: Matron, sturdy and outspoken, would have stamped a scornful foot upon the first whisper of scandal, despatched the girl before she'd had time to make further trouble, probably extorted from the young man an admission of responsibility. All safe: all harmless and clear and unsensational. And now...

Too late. If she made any move now to save the girl, Ann Kelly would be abroad with the dangerous knowledge that in this house an attempt had been made upon her life. Very well; by her own folly and malice she had

signed her death warrant and execution must be carried out. She had declared, and in writing, her intention of destroying herself by this means, and nurses must have opportunities of obtaining drugs and covering over the traces of their depredations. If she were not alive to deny it, the police would accept her as a suicide. With the threat of scandal gone, there was nothing to connect her death with anyone in the Harrison household.

Matron thought it a good idea if the girl could be kept for the night; in the morning she might be less hysterical and could be dealt with. They rang off in mutual trust and friendliness.

Once released, Stella flew to the poisons book in the surgery. A ball point pen was kept in the book, always handy. Not daring to put on a light, she picked it up and, turning back the pages at random, here and there altered a figure.

Ann Kelly was making a small play for handsome Dr. Graham, gazing up at him with increasingly bright eyes; her hands, thought Stella, looked like plump claws, waving as she chattered. Frederick was looking at her a little curiously. 'She seems very over-excited,' he said, aside, to Stella. 'Better get her upstairs, I think.' He took the six tablets from the mantelpiece. 'Don't forget these.'

'I don't want them,' said the girl, looking at Stella like an obstinate child, the coy glance reserved for Frederick.

'Mrs. Harrison will bring you a nice hot drink—'

'I don't want any more of Mrs. Harrison's nice hot drinks. She'll probably put arsenic in it, if she hasn't already.' But she saw the gathering frown, the coming together of the slanted black eyebrows. 'Well, all right—for *you*, Dr. Graham,' she said.

He dropped them into her hand and she swallowed them dry, one at a time, tossing back her head with each swallow. She looks like a hen,

drinking, thought Stella, revolted.

Frederick took her up the stairs, a hand under her elbow, but she would have no further assistance. 'I don't want *her* fussing around me,' she said, tossing her head towards Stella who was hurriedly making-up the bed. 'If you'll leave me alone, I'll go to bed quietly, honestly I will. I'm—a bit exhausted.' She clutched at a last moment of drama. 'It's been rather a strain.'

'Well, the bathroom's over there,' said Stella. She fished a clean towel out of the linen cupboard and ushered the girl in. When she returned to the bedroom, Frederick was going hastily through the scruffy little handbag, dipping a hand into coat pockets. 'We can't take any chances.' But there was nothing there; and when she returned from her very brief ablutions, they left her. The point of no return, thought Stella. But the point of return had been passed half an hour ago.

He took her down and she flopped wearily on to the disordered sofa and let him bring her a drink and sit there quietly with her, while the whisky did its reviving work. Once he went upstairs and poked his head into the darkened bedroom. 'A bit restless, but sound asleep and rather unbeautifully snoring,' he said, grinning, coming down again; and when Ricky returned he said the same thing to him. Asleep... Rather restless... Like a doomed ship, thought Stella, rolling, wallowing, settling down at last into the waters of death. 'You don't think we'd better....?' But better—what? There was nothing now to be done.

The sound of the stertorous breathing reached them again and she and Ricky made their way up to bed. She sent him on ahead, and made a pretence of going into the room to see that all was well. 'She's quite quiet now; only snoring a bit,' she said rejoining him. 'I dare say she was pretty worn out, silly girl,' he said. 'She'll be better in the morning.' And he

added, humbly and gratefully, 'Thank you, darling. You were splendid,' and kissed her. She turned away her head.

And in the morning, the girl was dead. Ann Kelly would smile her sweet, sneering, malicious little smile no more; and Stella Harrison was a murderer.

Suddenly the house was full of policemen, large, slow, kindly-spoken men, led by a small, quick, snapping little man called, apparently, Chief Inspector Cockrill. 'Sorry about this, Mrs. Harrison. Very distressing for you. And you say the girl was hardly known to you, to you or Dr. Harrison either...?'

Up at the hospital Matron told her story: evidently they had all underestimated the lengths to which the girl would go in her neurotic desire for attention—or the girl herself had overestimated the dose which it would be safe to play with... At the house, they went through the anticipated routine. The coffee cup proved all that it had promised: the Chief Inspector dipped in a tentative little-finger tip and sucked it—'No, nothing there—just black coffee,'—and gave instruction for a few drops to be poured off and the rest sent to the laboratories. 'We'll get a quick analysis done here, Sergeant: I dare say the doctor has some reagents about the place. We shan't find anything but it'll be nice to know for certain. Can't be too careful, Mrs. Harrison, for your sake and the doctor's. She might just possibly have smuggled something into it.'

'Just as well I didn't wash it up,' said Stella. 'But with all the fuss....'

It was a Sunday. Ricky and Frederick sat wretchedly side by side on the sofa. 'I'd have sworn she'd taken nothing.'

'So would I,' said Frederick.

'You examined her carefully?'

‘Well—we were both prepared, you see, to believe she’d taken nothing. I know the type,’ said Ricky, ‘and they never have taken anything; and Stella had seen her pulling up her stocking when she was pretending to be half unconscious. And if she had taken the stuff—well, it must have been getting on for an hour before we saw her, and she’d have been showing symptoms long before that.’

‘I quite agree,’ said Frederick. He added slowly: ‘Of course, Ricky, we were basing the whole thing on the assumption that if she’d taken anything it would have been before she left the hospital—which is what she said. But—suppose she’d taken it just before she walked in here? She’d have been at such an early stage that we’d have been justified in doing nothing?’

‘I’d have thought there’d be something, even so,’ said Ricky. (Silly blind fool! thought Stella—can’t he ever leave well alone...?)

‘I must confess,’ said Frederick, looking back, ‘that when she went up to bed I did think she seemed over-excited. I said so to you, Stella, didn’t I?—and flushed and not flopping about as she had been. But... Well, I suppose it was the stocking episode—I was so convinced that it was all an act....’ He broke off wretchedly, conscious of a failure and of the dire consequence of that failure to a human life.

When Ricky was uncertain and floundering, Stella could feel only irritation and a sort of contempt. Now, with Frederick so unwontedly at a loss, she was filled with a sense of protectiveness. She pointed out: ‘I’d just given her strong black coffee for that very purpose—to wake her up.’

‘You let her put herself to bed, Mrs. Harrison?’

‘She wouldn’t let me help her; we just left her to it.’

‘She said she was—exhausted was the word,’ said Frederick, thoughtfully. ‘And that she’d been through a strain. So—once again, you

see: one accepted it as natural. But I suppose it was in fact symptomatic—flushed, excited....’

‘And she was breathing very heavily,’ said Ricky. ‘I ought to have gone in....’ These men! They seemed bent upon making themselves look inept fools and worse. ‘I went in,’ said Stella. ‘She was snoring, yes; she just seemed heavily asleep.’

And so on, and so on—question and answer, but quiet, amicable, just talking it over....Times, places, words said, words unspoken. The story of the call to Matron, a passing reference to the ‘crush’ of the young lady on the doctor. ‘No doubt you get lots of that kind of thing?’

‘Doctors do,’ said Ricky, briefly.

‘And there was a boy friend in the case anyway?’

All unsuspecting, friendly—safe. Uniforms roaming about the house, meanwhile, yes: but what was there to find? Chief Inspector Cockrill closed the notebook in which he had been making what appeared to be random scratchings of an indecipherable nature and rose to his feet. ‘Perhaps Mrs. Harrison would show me over the house and let me get my bearings.’ And on the way upstairs he said, toiling after her, ‘All this must have been unpleasant for you?’

‘Horrible. But I’d never seen the girl before and I can’t say I fell in love with her. I don’t pretend to be personally all that upset.’ (Play it carefully!)

‘At least she won’t be able to make scenes about the doctor any more. I hear she was always creating, up at the hospital.’

She shrugged. ‘Everyone knew it was really the boy friend who was responsible for the child.’

He seemed to pause for a moment. He said quickly: ‘There was never any other suggestion, I suppose?’

She could have cut out her tongue; but anyway Ricky was sure to have come blurting out with it some time. She took the bull by the horns. 'I dare say she was all for pretending my husband was the father; but of course she had no hope of being believed.'

They had come to the landing. He stood there, facing her, small for a policeman, elderly, a crest of grey hair crowning a splendid head. 'All the same, you must have been worried? Mud sticks. If she'd gone round saying this kind of thing—'

'She couldn't go round saying it if she was dead.'

'Just what I was thinking,' said Chief Inspector Cockrill.

She lost a little of her poise. 'Anyway we all knew it was this young man at the hospital.'

'Oh, you knew that, did you?'

'Matron told me when I rang her up.'

'But that would be quite towards the end of the evening? By that time,' he said, his bright, dark eyes on hers, 'you'd have had time to get pretty worked up about it all?'

And suddenly it wasn't so easy and friendly after all and, showing him the room where the girl had died, the bathroom she had briefly visited, she knew that it hadn't really been easy and friendly, not any of the time. Hysteria rose in her, his hand on the banister as he followed her back down the stairs seemed like a great spider, hairless and horrible, creeping down after her to fasten itself upon her very life. She crushed down the panic, forced herself to quietness; but her head seemed stuffed with warm cotton-wool, nothing was clear, she could not remember, could not correlate, could not calculate....

And in the hall Ricky came up to her, drawing her out of earshot. 'Stella—I'm sure there's some morphia gone from the surgery.'

‘Nonsense!’ she said sharply. ‘There can’t be.’ They would be asking this question soon; he must, he must, give calm, reassuring answers.

‘Suppose she helped herself while she was alone in the room?’

‘She never was alone in the room, Ricky. I didn’t leave her, not for a second; and then you and Frederick were there. Besides, the key—’

‘A nurse would know whereabouts to look for the key. We all have some convenient hidey-hole.’

‘But I tell you, Ricky, she wasn’t left alone. Do stop muttering or they’ll get suspicious. Later if you like, we’ll add up the book if that’ll make you any happier—’

But not Ricky! Ricky must go forward painfully to the Inspector and say that as he’s just been saying to his wife, he has a wretched feeling that there ought to be more morphia....‘You see, Stella,’ he said over their heads to her, ‘whatever she’d taken must be accounted for somehow. If she got it from here, we mustn’t let the blame fall somewhere else.’

There was an altercation at the surgery door. Someone was insisting that her child had been knocked down by a car just outside, she wasn’t going to carry him round to any other doctor’s, not if she knew it ‘You go ahead,’ said Cockrill, seeing Ricky’s stricken face as the mother seemed about to be turned from the door by the policeman posted there. ‘I’ll just take your poisons book and be skimming through it.’ And he sat down with it on his knee, turning the pages earnestly like a child with a picture book. Frederick, comfortably sure that all was well with it, went out to help with the screaming child. After a while, the Inspector looked up. ‘Both partners would have access to this book, Mrs. Harrison?’

‘Of course,’ said Stella.

‘I see they use a ball point pen.’

‘We keep one marking the page in the book.’

‘M’m. Useful things,’ he said: ‘except that one never has a refill when one wants one. I see in this case they’ve changed to blue. Up to a week ago, it was black.’

So that was it! In the dim light, last night, she had not been able to see what in daylight was perfectly evident: that the two, rather smudgy, grey-blue colours in fact were different. Figures, on pages chosen at random, two months back, three months, six months back—standing out clearly as having been altered in a different coloured ink....

She began to talk rapidly and feverishly. ‘Do you mean that there’s been an alteration in the figures?’

‘What gives you that idea?’ he said.

‘Well, I mean... You’re suggesting that they’ve been altered in the new blue ink. But....Well, that shows,’ she said, desperately, ‘that my husband wouldn’t have done such a thing, none of us would: I mean, we’d know about the change of colour, wouldn’t we? So it must have been the girl. She must have taken the dose from the poison cupboard and altered the figures in the book—’

‘Why?’ said Inspector Cockrill.

‘Why? Why alter the figures, you mean? Well, she wouldn’t want to get my husband into trouble, I suppose. She was in love with him, after all.’

‘I thought you didn’t believe she was in love with him?’

‘Well, I seem to have been wrong, don’t I? Because, after all, we didn’t think she would really commit suicide, but she has, hasn’t she? I mean, a nurse would know—poison cupboards aren’t really all that inaccessible, Inspector, not in everyday life. It’s only the patients who’d have a job knowing where to find the little key—’

‘You don’t give your husband a reassuring reputation, Mrs. Harrison. Would the book be close to the cupboard?’

‘Yes, and with the pen marking the place. At least that’s where it was —,’

‘Last night?’ said the Inspector.

‘That’s where it would have been last night; because you see obviously the girl noticed it, and just picked up the book and altered the figures, far back where they wouldn’t be noticed—’

‘How do you know it was far back?’

‘Well, you were looking far back,’ she said, desperately. But the cotton-wool was clearing away a little. ‘I only mean that the girl had common sense; and she was nursing this phoney romance about my husband, her mind would work in this way. And she’d said, she’d left a note saying, she was going to take morphia—’

‘The note said that she *had* taken morphia.’

‘But we know that she can’t have, or they’d have seen the symptoms. And there was none missing from the hospital so she *must* have taken it from the surgery.’

‘Under your very nose, Mrs. Harrison?’ She was silent, defeated. He insisted: ‘You did tell me earlier, didn’t you, that you’d never left her alone in there for a moment.’

‘I mean... I meant... Not alone in that sense; of course I was in and out....’

But Ricky would let her down. Ricky would blurt out, in that idiotic honesty of his, that she had assured him, when he closely questioned her, that the girl could not possibly have taken the stuff... She thought with dark anger of the harm he had already done: of the dangerous corners, skilfully turned, only to be blocked by his exasperating, innocent candour. And, damn it all, whose fault was all this in the first place? It was his book, after all, his poisons cupboard, his diagnosis, his love affair.

His love affair.

For in fact who knew, who could be so certain, that Ricky was so exquisitely innocent? No smoke without fire? Surely he must have given the bitch some encouragement, to make her so hot after him? And if so—if so, didn't he deserve everything that was coming to him?—for deceiving her like this, deceiving her with this cheap little, grubby little tart....And if Ricky were out of the way....The memory of Frederick's arms around her rose up like an incense, hot and heady. He loves me, she thought. All this time, he's been loving me too and both of us just too—well, just too good, that's all, to let Ricky down. She remembered the hard, strong arms, his voice when he had called her marvellous....What had he said about her 'lovely blue eyes....'? He was horrified to see me caught up in this sordid little drama, seeing me humbled by this dreadful girl—and all through Ricky, all because Ricky can't keep his hands off the nurses, never caring how much he lets me down....

She knew what she must do. She knew that now the truth was out—that murder stalked with unveiled face through their little house and that she must act. What she had done, she had done to save Richard: done for his sake entirely, she insisted to herself, to save him from the consequences of his own sickening sins. Very well then, if anyone was going to have to pay the price, it surely should not be herself? Innocent or guilty, it was he who had brought about this horrible tragedy: innocent or guilty, then, let him pay. She raised her blue eyes to Inspector Cockrill's bright brown ones.

She said: 'Inspector—who do you suspect?'

He looked back at her with a sort of glitter. 'It's my duty to enquire into things, Madam.'

She bowed her head. 'What am I to say? Well—no, of course, it isn't true that I never left the girl alone, I was just trying to....' And she said,

blurting it out, raising miserable blue eyes again: 'One must protect those one—loves.'

'You are referring to your husband, Mrs. Harrison?'

'My husband?' she said, startled. 'Yes, of course. But, Inspector—don't think for one moment that I believe my husband was really the father of this girl's child...'

'Oh, I don't, Madam,' he said, with the faintest possible mocking imitation of her tone.

'Of course it was upsetting. She threatened to make disgusting scenes at the hospital; as you said, it wasn't till much later that we knew, when I talked to Matron, that there was nothing really to worry about.' She added with apparent inconsequence that her husband had gone back to his patient by then.

'Leaving the sedative tablets for the young lady to take?'

She permitted herself one terrified, upward glance; then lowered her eyes. 'Six small white tablets. I wondered perhaps if such a large dose could have contributed to her death: quite innocently, of course, naturally—only, if it were administered on top of whatever quantity of morphia it was that she gave herself—'

'Very ingenious, Madam. But that wouldn't account for the alterations in the book: would it?'

'I wish you wouldn't start calling me Madam,' said Stella, fluttering. 'Why suddenly so stiff? You don't suspect *me* of being a murderer, I suppose?'

'How could I?' he said. 'You had no opportunity, had you?'

'I gave the girl that coffee....'

He shook his head. 'Nothing there; we've already done a rough check.'

She breathed more freely. 'Well, but I was alone with her for some time, earlier on.'

'Only for a few minutes, really. No time for any other teas or coffees, and if you'd given her any pills or powder undisguised, I think she'd have mentioned it. And later one or both of the gentlemen was with her all the time. You didn't even see her to bed; you came straight down with Mr. Graham.'

'I did go into her room for a moment,' said Stella, 'on our way up to bed.' She let it hover in the air a moment. 'But of course Mr. Graham had seen the first symptoms before that—hadn't he?'

It had caught him on the hop: he gave her his bright, appraising glance. 'Of course,' said Stella, 'she might have smuggled something up to bed with her; and that's why she wouldn't let me stay.'

'But as you've just said—Mr. Graham had already seen the symptoms. And it still doesn't account for the book.'

The last hope gone; and she was glad. With Ricky out of the way....She said: 'Inspector—frankly: do you suspect someone?'

He gave her a wouldn't-you-like-to-know smile, turning back the pages of his notebook, narrowing his eyes, underlining half a dozen words. What they were, she could not see; but might not one hazard a guess? 'He placed six tablets on the mantelpiece...'? Frederick had said: 'Rather a large dose?' and Ricky had accounted for it, glibly. 'These Restuwell things are very mild.' But if they had *not* been Restuwell....

The two men came in from the surgery, their hands moist and pink from washing, after their ministrations to the child. Inspector Cockrill rose. 'Doctor, a word with you, if you wouldn't mind?' Ricky acquiesced, unsuspectingly, and they went off together to the surgery. Stella was left alone with Frederick. He said compassionately: 'You look all in.'

But she was all right again now: only still sick and dizzy with relief, after the traps and tensions of the past horrible half hour. She went up close to him, collapsed against him, butting her forehead into his shoulder: leaning there. He put one arm around her and gave her a little shake. 'Bear up, love! Nothing more to worry about now. He just wants to check the book with Ricky, I suppose; and then they'll all clear off and everything will be as-was.'

She did not move. She said, faintly, (and could not damp down the little, stabbing thought, half grim, half humorous, that she was behaving not at all unlike the departed Miss Kelly, after all)—'After last night, Frederick, nothing can ever again be quite "as-was".'

He released himself, taking her by the shoulders, holding her away from him, looking down, smiling, into her eyes. 'My dear, don't take it so desperately! The poor girl's dead but there's nothing we can do about it. It —'

She interrupted him. 'I mean—you and me.'

'You and me, Stella?'

And she knew: already, at the very sound of his voice as he said it, puzzled, 'You and me, Stella?'—she knew: it was all or nothing, he did not love her, it was madness to go on. But she went on, she was driven on, she could not help herself. 'Now that we've—found each other, Frederick, don't let's go on keeping up this terrible pretence. After all I've gone through, honestly I couldn't bear any more.' She felt the withdrawal, the repudiation, the shock: but she could not accept it, she could not let the dream go. 'When you held me in your arms last night, when you said I was marvellous —'

'So you were marvellous,' he said, trying to wrench the whole thing back to normality before it was too late, trying to save her from her own

shame. 'You behaved like an angel—'

She thrust herself against him, clinging to his arm. 'Don't hold me off, Frederick, don't let's pretend any more....' And her nervous volubility got the better of her, she began to gabble again, pouring out with bitter spite her apologia, the ugly defamation of Ricky, Ricky supposed to be so honourable and upright and all the time betraying her with a dirty little strumpet like that... Her gorge rose as she saw the girl before her, lolling in the chair, the author of all the terror and trouble of the past horrible hours and she poured out her loathing, sicking up from the depths of her soul all the loves and hates and passions and eroticisms of the long, unloving, unlovely years. 'Why should he stand in our way, what do we owe to him any longer—deceiving me, betraying me, messing about with a trollop like that, getting her into the family way and then when she promises trouble—murdering her, murdering her, honestly I wouldn't put it past him, to shut her mouth....' As he tore himself free from her grip, she clutched at him again, yearning up into his face, blind to all but the knowledge that this scene must continue, must go on, go on and never end; because when it was ended, there would be nothing left of hope. 'Oh, Frederick! At least you and I are free of it all, we do belong to each other....' She was beyond control, shaking, shuddering, her hands clawing at his arms.

He gave one mighty heave, thrusting her away from him and lifted his hand and hit her across her ashen face; and slammed out of the room.

She fell back on to the sofa, where only last night that hateful, smiling, evil little creature had lolled and taunted and brought the ruin into all their lives. Now indeed she was defeated. She had murdered—and all for nothing. She had betrayed an innocent man, her husband, kindest and best of men, as well in her heart she knew. If last night she had dreaded poverty, with him—what would it be like now, without him, without him, the bread-

winner; what would it be like with a husband in prison ‘for life’ for a sordid murder... Divorce? But of what use was a divorce when the dream was gone?—that dream which she now recognised with instant, bitter disillusion as nothing but the figment of her own sick, greedy imagination. She put her hand to her cheek and rising stood staring into the looking-glass over the mantelpiece....

Six little tablets had lain there: six white tablets upon whose innocence she herself had cast the first shadow of doubt—the shadow which now stretched out so dark and dangerous over the life of the only person in the world who cared for her. ‘Oh, God—Ricky!’ she whispered to that white face staring back at her from the mirror. ‘What have I done to him?’

But... She began to see that all might not yet be lost: that she might at one swoop save Ricky and repay that blow across the face. She heard the slam of the door as Frederick burst out of the house, the angry altercation with the policeman stationed outside. She began frantically to tidy her disordered hair, straighten her dress, steady her shaking hands. She went out into the hall. ‘Inspector—could I see you one minute, in here?’

Ricky was standing in the hall. He gave her a look that frightened and puzzled her: a look of incredulous, heart-broken, bitter reproach. Well—she must explain it all away later; she could always manage Ricky. Meanwhile... ‘Sit down, Inspector. I’ve got to—tell you something.’ She perched herself, knees nervously locked together, on the edge of the sofa. ‘This is horrible for me, absolutely horrible. May I ask you first—am I right in thinking that you suspect my husband? I mean—the book being altered —’

He was eyeing her curiously. ‘As to that, it’s fair to tell you that your husband says he simply can’t understand it. He has no other answer.’

‘And then those tablets. Six little tablets that were supposed to be Restuwell—but could have been morphine—’

He continued to watch her, silent.

She was calm again now; but she said on a rising note: ‘—and which my husband never administered to that girl.’

He jerked up his head. ‘Didn’t give them to the girl?’

‘Don’t you remember the evidence, Inspector? He put them on the mantelpiece and—then he left the house. I went into another room, to telephone Matron. When I came back there were still six tablets in their little row on the mantelpiece. It was Mr. Graham who actually handed them to the girl and made her swallow them.’ She sat up very straight. ‘Inspector, my husband is in danger; and he’s my husband. Who is to say that those tablets were the same ones he handed to Mr. Graham?’

Inspector Cockrill sat for a moment very still. When he spoke it was equably. ‘You mean that Mr. Graham might have slipped across to the surgery when you were on the telephone, helped himself to morphia tablets, picked up the pen and altered the book—and exchanged the tablets without the girl realising what was happening?’ It was beautifully neat. ‘You’d already worked out the possibility?’

‘One has to think of all sides,’ said the Inspector, tolerantly.

‘Nothing was said as to whether he left the room while I was phoning.’

‘But what could be his motive in doing such a thing?’

‘The girl could have destroyed the practice, you know, with all this vicious scandal.’ She saw his deprecatory glance. ‘But of course, Inspector, that was not the motive.’ And she straightened her shoulders, again, clasping her hands on her knee till the knuckles were gleaming knobs of ivory against the dull white flesh. She said again: ‘This is horrible for me:

but I must protect my husband. You see, Inspector—Mr. Graham was in love with me.’

That brought him up, startled. ‘In love with you?’

‘I think it had been going on for years,’ she said. ‘He never said anything. I never knew and God knows, Ricky never knew. But last night—well, it started with his just being kind and comforting and then—he just lost his head, I suppose; he put his arms round me, he called me wonderful and marvellous, he raved about my blue eyes, all that sort of thing, you know. I—was utterly taken aback. What my husband would say if he knew...!’

The Inspector was silent again. He said at last: ‘Hardly account for the murder of the girl though, would it?’

Stella grew excited. ‘Do you understand *anything* about that girl, Inspector? She was vicious; vicious and hysterical and a mischief-maker. She hated me because she fancied herself in love with my husband—she’d have done anything to blacken my name. And she—saw all this, you see. I suppose he thought she was half dopey, anyway, as I say he simply lost his head, he didn’t care whether she was there or not. But then....She could have destroyed us, Inspector; she could have destroyed us all. Bad enough running round saying that she was having a baby by my husband; but if she could add to it that his wife was having an affair with his partner! And all so easy!—people knew about the other thing, but nobody in the world knew about this, he was the very last person to be suspected. And she was so utterly worthless; and after all she wanted to die, she was telling everybody that she wanted to die....’ It was strange how clear her mind was, taking into consideration every point, every twist and turn; and yet how limited—for somewhere in her consciousness she knew that this was not all. Yet what could one do but meet each blow as it came; and before it came....‘This

morning when I—I realised you suspected my husband—well, Inspector, there are only three people involved and I knew that my husband was no more guilty than I was. I—well, engineered him out of the room, I knew you'd ask him to show you the poisons book. You see I—well, I wanted to make a test. I spoke to Dr. Graham, I went up close to him, I let him think that what he'd said last night had been—well, not unwelcome to me. He responded at once. He put his arms round me, he called me his angel; and I played up, I said things against my husband, I pretended to believe that he'd deceived me with that girl. I said—I drew back from him and looked into his face, Inspector, and I said that if my husband were convicted of her murder—then he and I would be free. He knew at once; he knew by the look on my face when I said that, that I'd realised the truth—that that was what he had been thinking, that he'd killed the girl himself, knowing Ricky would get the blame. And once again, he lost his head; he pushed me violently aside, knocking his hand against my face—you can see the mark, here—and rushed out of the house. God knows where! To think up his version, I suppose—no doubt *I* made up to *him*, no doubt it was *I* who wanted my husband accused! But you'll be ready for that now, Inspector. You'll be ready for anything that comes.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I'm ready for anything that comes.'

She was exhausted; her mind twisting through the terrible underground warren of her doubts and fears; but she forced herself to a sort of outward calmness, sitting down quietly, hiding her shaking hands in her lap; very pale, head bent, eyes cast down. 'It's—not a pretty story,' she said.

He sat down beside her and a little to her astonishment, leaned over and put his fingers to her wrist. He said: 'Now, do you know, Mrs. Harrison, I think that's rather where you and I disagree. I do think it's a pretty story;

as pretty a story as ever I listened to—even prettier than the one you told me before.’

Terror rose in her, a wild, upward surge. ‘What do you mean? What story?’

‘The story about your husband,’ he said. He left his thin, hard hand across her wrist, like the hand of a mother, absently quietening her child while her mind is elsewhere. ‘You’ve been very clever, Mrs. Harrison. You’ve stuck so closely to the truth and that’s what most people fail to do. The conversation with Dr. Graham just now—I daresay my sergeant, outside in the hall, will confirm almost every word that passed between you; just a matter of the interpretation. Which of course it might be; everything may be, when one comes to look closely at it. Don’t you agree?’ And he dropped his note of sardonic banter and said sharply: ‘For instance—that coffee?’

‘The coffee?’ she faltered. But surely—surely she was safe enough there. Surely she had made no mistake; the lipstick on the rim, the fingerprints; hers as well as the girl’s, just as they would have been, no silly nonsense about wiping away all the prints—she’d been rather proud of that. ‘I gave her some coffee, yes. My husband told me to.’

‘That’s right. He told you to. You left the two men in the surgery with the girl, and went through to the kitchen. That gave you a little time to think, I suppose. Suddenly you came back and packed them all off to the drawing-room. That’s true, isn’t it? It’s in your own statement.’

‘Yes, it’s true. Why not? I thought it would be more comfortable for them in the drawing-room. There’s only one decent chair in the surgery.’

‘You said earlier that the reason was that you might be interrupted by an emergency patient.’

‘That too. All sorts of little considerations.’

‘One little consideration would be that it left the surgery free?’

‘I suppose you mean for me to go through and get the morphia tablets —?’

‘Thank you,’ he said, and again he had that glitter in his eye. ‘Morphia tablets—stirred into the coffee: hot, strong black coffee with lots of sugar in it so that she would not taste anything else. You came back into the drawing-room and handed the cup to her—’

—and screamed at her to drink it!—*drink* it! Would Frederick now come hurrying forward with little damaging, dangerous recollections like these? The cotton-wool was closing down upon her once more, stifling her brain with its clouds of unreason, inability to co-ordinate. She clawed her way through it feebly, up to the surface. ‘And may I ask—when did I alter the book?’

‘Any time,’ he said. ‘Then or later. I don’t think that matters. You’d given her the coffee: and in the words of the poet there was “poison i’ the cup”.’

She rallied her whole fighting spirit. ‘A literary policeman—how engaging!’

He gave her a small, sardonic bow. Let the poor mouse take what cheap comfort it may, the bow seemed to say, before the cat gobbles it up.

And yet, after all... What can he prove? she thought. He’s just trying to bluff me. He knows, yes: but if I admit nothing, his knowledge is of no use to him, none at all. All right, so I could have taken the morphia, I could have altered the book; but when could I have administered the dose? Not when I was alone with the girl, or she’d have said so—when she said, for example, that I’d probably put arsenic in the next hot drink I gave her. And for the rest of the time, I was never alone with her, or anyway not till after she’d begun showing symptoms. There’s only the cup of coffee: and he may

guess about that but he can't know—the cup is safe. All I have to do is stand firm and not let myself be drawn....And in the blessed relief of it, she asked, taunting him, the mouse growing suddenly large and mocking, insolently menacing, not a mouse any longer but a rat with bared white fangs, match for any stupid great cat: 'And do let me ask you, Inspector—did you, "in the words of the poet"—*find* any poison in the cup?'

'No,' he said. 'You'd been careful to rinse that out.'

'But it still had dregs in it.'

'From the dregs in the coffee pot, no doubt.'

'Goodness,' she said, all sarcasm. 'How neat!'

'Yes, it was,' he said. 'Very neat. Nobody else, by the way, could have handled the cup? Your own story does confirm that?'

'Certainly,' she said. 'I'm not afraid of the cup, not in the least. I take full responsibility—nobody went into the kitchen after I left the cup there, on the draining board. With some dregs of coffee in it and nothing else—you said so yourself, Inspector, you dipped your finger in and sucked it and you said—'

'I said there was nothing there but black coffee,' he said. 'And that was true.' And his fingers on her wrist grew suddenly from a light, restraining touch to a ring of steel. 'You'd forgotten to put any sugar in the dregs,' he said.

PART TWO

Choice of Entrées

Murder Game

THE OLD MAN WAS SIMPLY delighted to make his acquaintance. 'You're most welcome, my dear boy; not often I see a fresh face, these days, not one that I like, anyway—and you remind me a bit of myself when *I* was a lad. You're staying, I hope?' All about them stretched wide lawns, velvety green in the bright spring sunshine; over the shining flower-beds, men were working with spud and hoe. 'What brings you here?'

'The Gemminy case,' said Giles.

'Yes, well you know, I'm pretty hot on a murder puzzle; I've heard a lot of confessions in my time.' He thought about it. 'Gemminy. The solicitor? The name's familiar but my memory's all to pieces, these days. A good chap, I seem to recall?' His old mind searched back over recent months. 'I do remember something in the papers, that brought the name back. Sealed Room Mystery, didn't they call it?'

'He was in his office, bolts drawn inside the door, window broken—glass still vibrating; but four storeys up. He'd been strangled and then tied to his chair and then stabbed. The wound so fresh that it was still bleeding when the police broke in. But nobody in the room.'

'Well, my goodness!' He hooked his heavy, veined old hand into the young man's arm. 'Give us a haul up this slope and we'll sit on a bench under the mulberry tree—not many gardens nowadays can boast a mulberry, can they?—and you can tell me all about it. I've forgotten, I forget everything nowadays, so you can start from scratch.' And his bright eyes shone. 'Test me! We'll play a sort of game of Hunt the Thimble—Hunt the Murderer, if you like. Tell me the outlines, tell it to me as the police will

have got it, clues, bits of evidence—not necessarily the truth, you know, but as it came to them. Let me work it out and see if I can beat them to it....’

Now that it had come, a sort of horror grew in Giles’ mind, a sort of sickness at the thought of going over it all yet again, of dragging Helen’s name again through the blood and the terror and the doubt. But they had said to talk about it as much as he could, to get it out of his system, to try to forget. Try to forget me, Helen had said, try to forget....And so....

And so they came to the bench; Giles Carberry sat with the old man there and told him the story of the Gemminy case.

Old Gemminy’s office: a bare, square room, not very large. Strong, heavy door. Opposite the door, the single window—one large pane of glass, the glass broken to form a jagged hole, perhaps two feet in diameter. A little broken glass on the floor beneath the sill; much more in the deserted warehouse yard below. As Giles had said, the window four storeys up.

And at the desk, between window and door, Thomas Gemminy, solicitor dealing largely in criminal matters; seventy years old. Tied to the chair with a length of cord torn from the blind, tipped sideways, half asprawl across the paper-strewn desk, staring with empurpled face towards the door; his own silk handkerchief twisted about his neck and, for good measure, a knife thrust between the shoulder-blades; only a little blood, but the wound still oozing. The paper knife, which had always lain on his desk, not there.

And at the door, as the police came pounding up the stairs, Rupert Chester hammering, double-fisted, shouting out that there was smoke coming from under the door, that Uncle Gem wouldn’t answer....

‘Rupert Chester?’

‘Rupert was one of his wards. We were all his wards—he constituted himself guardian to all sorts of children he came across with—well, with

unhappy backgrounds. You must remember that? Anyway, I'll tell you later. But Rupert was one of them.'

'All right. Well....' The old man considered it, forming the picture in his mind's eye. 'The general scene? The buildings opposite?'

Giles Carberry drew angles on the gravelled path. 'This is the office block; big old house, actually—we took up the whole top floor of it. Stairs, no lift. No one else working there of course on a Saturday afternoon—and the day of the World Cup Final, what's more. Street here. These are Rupert's rooms and mine, looking across the street to the police station opposite. Uncle Gem's the end room, the corner room; only one window and that overlooked the warehouse yard, at right angles to the street.'

'Narrow yard?'

'Yes, but don't start on rope bridges and pulleys and things from the opposite roof; or ledges or painters' cradles and the rest of the gimmicks. They've all been considered and counted out.'

'Don't tell me, don't tell me,' said the old man like a child playing a game.

'Well, but these are facts, not evidence which might or might not be true. And the fact is that no one could have got out of the jagged hole in that window, fifty feet up.'

'All right. Well?' He twiddled his gnarled old thumbs. 'This Rupert Chester? Another of old Gemminy's wards, you say?'

'Wards, adopted children, whatever you like to call us. His "Crickets". Rupert and me and Helen; and lots more of us, of course....'

A *good* chap, the old man had said; and so indeed he had been, Thomas Gemminy—good, kind and compassionate. Thrown by his work a great deal among criminals, his heart had bled for innocent families, left to the mercy of an indiscriminating world. Financial help, help in finding new

jobs, new homes, often even new lives far away from England where the past would not catch up on you...‘We used to think that the ones he encouraged to emigrate were the ones with really dangerous pasts,’ said Giles. ‘But of course we never knew; none of us ever knew about the others, he said it would not have been fair.’ While his wife had lived, his own home, even, had been open to pitiful children, often too young to know, themselves, what their parentage had been. The Gemminy Crickets, he called them: one of his foolish, gentle jokes. There was a Gemminy Crickets Trust, to which all those who had passed through his hands might turn for help in time of need; his will left everything to the trust. (‘So no clues there; you can leave money out of it.’) He had been to great lengths to cover their tracks, even from themselves; (not with Giles, however—Giles had been old enough to remember that night, the night his mother and father had been hacked to death by the madman with an axe—it was not only the children of criminals Thomas Gemminy befriended: there had been the victims too.)

Of them all, in his old age three had been most close to him—Giles, Rupert, Helen: Giles and Rupert because they had qualified and gone into partnership with him, and Helen, his pet, his darling, last to be adopted in his own home before his wife had died: Helen with her great eyes looking out so bravely from beneath the cloud of her soft, dark hair....

‘His Talking Orchid he used to call her,’ said Giles. ‘But she’s very tough, really. Spent all her life with us boys doing everything we did, and most things better....’ The smile died out of his eyes. ‘All that emerged at the trial.’

‘Don’t tell me, don’t tell me,’ said the old man again. ‘Let me guess.’ He eyed the young man shrewdly. ‘You were in love with her?’

There came upon him the sickness, the stab of sickness and pain that came whenever he thought too closely about Helen; but he said, keeping his tone light: 'What do you think?'

'And Rupert?'

'Rupert too.'

'Which did she favour?'

Rupert, gay, sweet-tempered Rupert with his smiling blue eyes and his heavy, curling auburn hair, so ruthlessly brushed flat only to come curling up again....Himself, dark, slender, serious, who could yet be so full of jokes and laughter....'One day it was one of us, one day the other; she just made hay with us. And then when this third party came along—'

'Oh, there was a third party then? Not just between you three?—the murder I mean, of course. Suspects one, two, three and four: you and Rupert and Helen and—A.N.Other?' The old man rose, hoisting himself forward with a jerk of his heavy arms and shoulders. 'Let's walk a little; it's chilly sitting still. And wasn't there something about a policeman murdered too? Old Gemminy rang up the police station with some message?—and later a policeman also rang up?'

Thomas Gemminy in his 'sealed room', dying—ringing up the police station across the street with that wild, mad, urgent summons—something about something or somebody 'vanishing into thin air', something about the window, and then on a note of sheer, squealing terror, something about 'the long arms...' And an hour later Police Constable Cross, supposed to be pounding his unsensational beat a couple of miles away, ringing up also, with crazy gabblings, 'Got me by the throat....' and something about the window and something about vanishing into thin air and something on a suddenly rising note of terror about 'the long arms....' A 'phone box had been traced at last with a pane of glass broken; and a hundred yards away,

submerged in a tank of water in a half-demolished old factory, his body—bound and strangled; and stabbed in the back with the missing paper knife from Mr. Gemminy’s office....

‘He came from the same police station?’

The only police station in that small country town—just across the street from the office, where they had all been known so well: Thomas Gemminy and his two young men, in and out every other day pleading, arguing, deliberating, fighting, on behalf of their dubious clientele. There had been half a dozen of the lads getting their tea when the first message had come through—down in the basement canteen, from whose windows they could actually see the windows of Gemminy’s offices, five storeys above. They’d all dropped everything the minute the name of Gemminy was mentioned and, hardly waiting for permission let alone orders, caught up their helmets and gone dashing across the street. ‘So it couldn’t have been two minutes from the time he rang—’

‘What exactly did he say?’

‘I’ve told you. That he was dying. That someone or something, the operator couldn’t make sense out of it, had strangled him; that the desk was on fire, he must have help quick. And then this thing about “through the window” and then about “vanishing into thin air”. The operator kept trying to interrupt him, trying to get the name and address and at last he choked out the name Gemminy and then there was this dreadful scream about “the long arms”. As I say, within a couple of minutes a sergeant and at least five of the boys were trying to break down the door.’

But Rupert had been already there, beating at it with a closed fist, barging at it with a bruising shoulder, yelling ‘Uncle Gem! Uncle Gem!’ The sergeant had told off a man to stand at the head of the stairs and watch for anyone escaping and then with the rest had launched himself against the

door. Rupert had yelled at last: 'It must be bolted. There's bolts top and bottom.' And a panel was stove in and an arm thrust through and up and a panel kicked in and an arm thrust through and down; and as they stood back for one more concerted effort against the stout lock still holding—into the momentary silence there came from within the room, thin and clear and eerily tinkling, the sound of breaking glass.

And the door gave at last and burst inwards and suddenly the smoke-filled room was a flurry of blue-uniformed arms and legs; and there was nobody there, not a living soul.

Not a living soul. A dead man, only: strangled, staring at them across the burning desk, the wound in his back still oozing blood, and the jagged edges of the broken window pane behind him still vibrant, as though someone had that moment gone diving through.

But the hole was two feet in diameter and the window fifty feet up.

Rupert Chester and a couple of the men rushed over to the body, the sergeant with another made a dash for the window. Nothing moving, not a sign of life in the yard below—a warehouse yard, used for deliveries, swept clean, a shell, an empty space enclosed by blank walls and a high barricaded gate. 'Watch,' said the sergeant to the man, 'don't take your eyes off it.' But he knew there would be nothing to see and already a sort of dread was forming in him, a dread and a confusion. In the centre of the room all was pandemonium as, coughing and choking in the smoke belched out from the burning desk, men beat at the flaming papers; and out of the confusion, Rupert Chester's voice cried, sharp and high: 'For God's sake!—look at this! It's Helen—she's in danger. I must go.'

And he was gone. 'Shall I go after him?' yelled one of the men, but, 'No, no,' the sergeant yelled back, 'leave him, get on with the job.' There was too much to do, no one could be spared; and after all, Rupert Chester

was known to them, it wasn't like a suspect disappearing, unidentifiable. And besides—there he'd been outside the locked and bolted door, trying to get *in*. And the smoke was getting thicker, a man was calling out that the body was beginning to scorch, a voice cried, 'For God's sake, aren't there any extinguishers?', a voice cried, 'I'll go for the fire brigade....' What was one to do?—move the body with all its tell-tale clues or risk the whole lot being consumed by the fire? He fought his way over to the flaming desk, looked briefly at the old man's body, trying to take in the whole scene and impress it on his memory; ordered, 'Yes, move him, chair and ail, carry him outside.' No time to worry about Rupert Chester now; and if there really were some danger to Helen Crane, at least someone was coping with it. And anyway, thank God!—here was the fire brigade.

'Was the room badly burnt?'

'Most of the woodwork,' said Giles. 'The furniture and the door itself and so on; and papers, of course, there were masses of paper in the room. Not much left in the way of clues, once the hoses had soused it all. And of course no sign of the note.'

'What note?'

'The note that had made Rupert shoot off to look for Helen. He said it was on a scribbling pad; huge letters, scrawled—HELEN—DANGER—some such thing.'

'Did anyone else see it?'

'He said he'd shown it to one of the men; but they all deny having seen it.'

'That was predictable,' said the old man dryly.

Giles did a double take. 'You mean you're *there*?'

'What's "there"? I'm in a dozen places. If you mean do I see how it could have been done—'

‘You haven’t heard yet about the dead policeman.’

‘I don’t see how he complicates things. We now have all our suspects—all of them,’ said the old man with a significant wink, ‘outside the locked room and free to be running around murdering policemen or doing anything else. Still, tell me about him.’

‘He was killed about five o’clock. Uncle Gem’s call came through to the station at near enough three minutes to four; at five the policeman rang up. And saying almost the same words, that’s what made it so uncanny—about the long arms and something vanishing into thin air. First he said “George?”—that was the chap on the switchboard—“this is Dinkum.” Dinkum was his nickname at the station—and he gave his number and was just saying where he was calling from when he seemed to be disturbed and there came this frightful shouting, again about somebody strangling him, just like Uncle Gem, and the word “window” and “vanished into thin air”—and then a sort of gurgling scream and the operator could just make out the words “the long arms...” And as I told you, they finally found a call box with a broken window pane and they searched around there and the body was in a half-demolished factory, a hundred yards away.’

They came to the end of the gravelled path and turned back. ‘The murderer seems to have been very fortunate in the privacy of his arrangements.’

‘Well, but they *were* arrangements, weren’t they? And what arrangements! Saturday afternoon and the final of the World Cup: every soul in the place glued to the telly—and for good measure a wet, blustery day: gorgeous weather over most of the country, but with us a wet, blustery day.’

They came to the bench and sat down again; the old man tired easily. From below came the whirr of a motor-mower, the lawn was striped in

paler and darker green as the grass bent beneath the cropping blades. But the old man's mind was in a sealed room, locked and bolted, where glass broke, a dying man was stabbed—and yet where no living man could have been; in a 'phone box where a country-town policeman choked and yammered and presumably within a few moments, also died. 'Any actual tie between the two deaths?'

'The same words spoken—"into thin air" and this terrifying thing about "the long arms". And it was the knife from Uncle Gem's office; and traces of his blood group were mingled with the man's own. It was all a good bit diluted with the water—he'd been heaved into this sort of half-destroyed tipped-up water tank. Tied up with some wire rope which had been lying about there.'

'I see. All right. Well, those are the facts,' said the old man, rubbing his hands. 'So then, let's have the alibis.'

'Rupert's and Helen's and mine—?'

'And A.N.Other's. We musn't forget Helen's third suitor. I am assuming,' said the old man, 'that if money was out of it, the motive was something to do with Helen?'

And they were back to Helen. But he had to go through with it now. 'That was the conclusion the police came to at this stage,' said Giles.

'Yes, well we want to play it from the police angle. But first—what authority had Mr. Gemminy over Helen? With regard to her marrying, I mean. Could he prevent it?'

'Not legally, probably, if that's what you mean. But he could advise; and his advice was based upon knowledge of the past. He could prevent it by—well, warnings; to her, to us, to other people. He knew our life histories, our heredities....'

‘Sufficient motive certainly, for silencing him. More potent, in fact, than actual authority.’

‘Somebody thought so,’ said Giles, grimly assenting.

‘Very well. Let’s move on now to what actually happened, the order of events.’ Like a child, excited and eager, he wriggled himself heavily into a more comfortable sitting position on the bench. ‘True or false—as the police got them. Leave me to do the sorting out. *They* had to.’

In a way, the ball had started with P.C.Cross: finishing his dinner in the canteen, pedalling off to his beat, not remarked again until the telephone call at five o’clock; his body found an hour or so later in the disused factory.

‘The next exact time we know is when I went to the office to see Uncle Gemminy....’

Mr. Gemminy had stayed on there because he wanted to talk to them—to Giles and Rupert: but separately. ‘I was to go at half past two, Rupert at four. He didn’t want to talk at home because Helen might be there—she still lived with him. Rupert and I shared a flat in a block about fifteen minutes’ drive from the office. Anyway, the thing was that this third party had turned up and the old man didn’t like it. Who the chap was we didn’t then know but I think *he* knew, or he’d guessed, and he wasn’t too pleased. He thought she’d had her head turned, he thought she didn’t know her own mind; and anyway he would secretly have liked it to be Rupert or me, he wanted to keep it in the family. Anyway, his idea was to sort it out first with us two and find out how each felt about her before he did any more. But nothing terrific you know—just a family discussion.’

‘All right. So at half past two you went along?’

‘M’m. Leaving Rupert at the flat. We had a very affable chat, the old man and I, I told him my side of the thing—’

‘He didn’t tell you the identity of A.N.Other?’

‘No, he didn’t,’ said Giles.

‘Well, never mind; that we can easily enough deduce. And so—?’

‘And so at half past three I came away and he was safe and sound then. And don’t say he wasn’t,’ said Giles, ‘because he was. He rang up Rupert after I’d left—and it wasn’t till four o’clock that he rang the police.’

‘Yes. Well?’

‘Well, I drove home. I parked the car and just as I came round the corner to the front door of the flats, I saw Rupert come running down the steps, hatless and carrying his mac. in spite of the rain, as though he’d just snatched it up all anyhow—and he scrambled into his car and went shooting off.’

‘Why in such a hurry? His appointment wasn’t till four?’

‘Because, so he says, Uncle Gem had just rung him up—’

‘The exact words, please.’

‘ “Well,” he said first, “haven’t you started?” and Rupert said, “I was just leaving; isn’t Giles still with you?” and Uncle Gem said, “No, he went at half past,” and he was just saying something about “a very good talk” or something like that when he suddenly broke off and said, “There it is again. I don’t like it, Rupert. There seems to be something funny happening outside the window.” ’

‘Fifty feet up?’

‘Well, that’s what he said; and then he said, “Do come quickly, Rupert, there’s something wrong.” So naturally Rupert whizzed off not even taking time to put on his mac.’

‘Or to ring the police station first?—just across the road from your uncle.’

‘Well, I don’t think one would, do you?’ said Giles. ‘He says it just never entered his head.’

The old man thought it over. He said dryly: ‘All very convenient for *you*, dear boy? Because if you were seeing Rupert outside your flats, you weren’t back at the office, fifteen minutes’ drive away, murdering your uncle—were you?’

‘*If* I was seeing Rupert,’ said Giles. ‘The police thought of that one, too—don’t worry! They thought I might have noted earlier where his car was parked, deduced that he’d have run out—he always does everything at the double. Faked up the alibi, in fact. But there was the macintosh.’

‘You could hardly have guessed that on such a day he wouldn’t be wearing it. I think it does let you out.’

‘And Rupert. Because if I saw him outside the flats, he couldn’t have been back at the office a couple of miles away, murdering Uncle Gem, either.’

‘Your uncle didn’t die until after Rupert could have had time to arrive there.’

‘Yes, but things had already started. He said so to Rupert.’

‘We have only Rupert’s word for that,’ said the old man. He changed his tack. ‘And meanwhile—Helen?’

‘Helen was out of it,’ said Giles quickly. ‘She was up on the heath, walking—and the heath’s fifteen miles away.’

‘What, the whole afternoon? On a wet, blustery day?’

‘She does it to keep fit. She does film work—stunt stuff, really, in a mild sort of way: the stand-ins, riding and diving and skiing and shooting, all that lot. I told you we boys brought her up tough.’

‘Lots of people saw her on the heath, I dare say?’

‘You said it yourself—who else would be up there on such a day?’

‘Then who says she was there?’

‘I say so. I’d arranged to meet her there.’

‘And did you?’

‘No,’ said Giles. ‘But that was my fault. I mucked up the arrangements. The heath’s a huge place. I said to go on and I’d meet her—well, after I’d left Uncle Gem, but I couldn’t tell her that, she didn’t know I was seeing him. I just said about half past four by the Bell, which is a pub. But she thought I said at the Dell, which is a place where we sometimes picnic. They do sound the same if you mumble.’

‘And did you mumble?’

‘Yes, because I didn’t want Rupert to hear. The fact is, I thought I’d get in first, after seeing Uncle Gem. All’s fair?’ said Giles with a faintly self-deprecatory air.

‘All right. A quarter to four. Helen’s up on the heath, without an alibi; you and Rupert alibi one another outside your flats. What’s your story next?’

‘My story, as you so flatteringly call it, is that I went in, made myself a cup of char—as I hadn’t said I’d meet her till half past; and I’d left Uncle Gem a bit early—and then drove up to the Bell. And Rupert’s story is that he couldn’t get into Uncle Gem’s office and was hammering at the door when the police arrived and broke it open. He went in with them and then he saw this note on the desk and he was so shaken by the murder and this on top of it that he never stopped to think but just rushed off to look for Helen. She wasn’t at home, he rang round frantically to a few friends, nothing doing there; so he got into the car again and drove about just stupidly searching in places where he thought she might be—’

‘Did the places where he thought she might be happen to take him near the scene of the policeman’s murder?’

‘It’s all within a smallish area,’ said Giles, briefly. ‘A couple of miles or so. Except of course for the heath and that’s where she was, half an hour’s drive away from any of it. Rupert went out there eventually, knowing she often walked there at the week-end. But as I say it’s a huge place and in the end we all missed one another.’

‘So at the time of the policeman’s killing—about five you said—Helen and Rupert have in fact no alibis? And you?’

‘I’m afraid you will find this very convenient too,’ said Giles. ‘But yes, I have one for this time also. I waited for Helen for about twenty minutes and then I thought she might have decided not to come, it being such a filthy day; so I rang up the house to ask. The housekeeper will tell you so.’

‘You could have done that from anywhere.’

‘Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I did it from the call box outside the Bell. And I can prove it because I could see the people inside all crowded round the television—the pub was closed, but we know the people, we often go there; and I knocked on the window and made signs asking the score and they signalled back that extra time was being played, so I knew it was all square; and we all made praying signals through the glass....’

‘Well, I must say that sounds pretty conclusive.’

‘The police thought so too,’ said Giles; dry in his turn.

‘So that leaves Rupert and Helen.’

‘And your dear friend A.N.Other. And perhaps you’ll explain to me,’ said Giles, ‘not so much which of them killed Uncle Gemminy as how any of them *could* have. The door locked—the key was in the debris of the burnt-out desk, by the way—and bolted from the inside. The window was fifty feet up and a child couldn’t have got through the hole in the glass. Yet it had just that moment been broken and Uncle Gem had that minute been

stabbed. So before we have accusations—I think there should be explanations.’

The old man shrugged huge shoulders up to the thick lobes of his ears. ‘Oh, well, as to that there are probably half a dozen. I can think of three, straight off—one for each of them: One for Rupert, one for Helen, one for my dear friend, as you call him, A.N.Other....’

Giles reacted immediately. ‘Why should Helen do such a thing? You agree that this crime was committed because of her.’

‘If it was,’ said the old man, ‘who more interested than herself?’ He brushed aside interruptions. ‘Thomas Gemminy was discussing the marriage of this precious ewe lamb of his. He knew all the past histories, the heredities—he could tell what might for ever put an end to any idea of marriage between Helen and—somebody. So—somebody silenced him. Somebody set fire to the desk where dangerous documents might be kept; and silenced him.’

‘All right—so you say. But I say—how?’

The old man was silent, sitting deep in thought, the sunshine beating down through the leafless branches of the mulberry tree, dappling his big bald head with light and shadow. Giles prompted at last, trailing a red herring across that other name: ‘Take Rupert—’

He seemed to come awake. ‘All right, very well: take Rupert! Rupert pretends a telephone call to give him an excuse to hurry off and get there early; or perhaps even actually gets one, telling him simply that you’ve left and he may as well come along now—but either way is sure that you are out of the way. He strangles the old man, ties him to the chair, conceals the knife about himself somewhere and comes out, locking the door behind him. When the police arrive, he’s pounding on it. He suggests that it’s bolted on the inside and when the panel’s broken, is the first to thrust

through his arm and pretend to draw back the bolts: which in fact, of course, never were shot at all. The lock gives way, they all tumble in and he goes with them. Chucks the key into the fire raging round the desk; and that's all there is to it.' He asked as a child asks, playing Hunt the Thimble: 'Am I getting warm?'

'Not frightfully,' said Giles. 'What about the stabbing, for example?'

'The oldest trick in the crime thrillers, boy. Bends over the body pretending to be frantic with anxiety, jabs in the knife. So recently dead, there'd still be a little ooze of blood.'

'All this in front of half a dozen policemen?'

'In a crowded room filled with smoke; everyone excited and milling about....'

Giles clutched at a straw. 'But the window! They heard the glass being shattered just as they were actually breaking in.'

'They heard glass being shattered,' said the old man. 'Which is rather a different thing.'

'The broken pane was still quivering.'

He shrugged again. 'Something thrown while Rupert's hand was through the panel—a piece of the panel itself, perhaps; it would be burnt up afterwards in the fire. Or the window broken in advance and a piece of the glass kept back for just this purpose—there was a little inside the window-sill, wasn't there? Threw it while his hand was through the broken panel, out of sight; and a lucky shot hit the broken pane and started it vibrating again. But all that was needed was the sound.'

'Good God!' said Giles. He could not help a grudging admiration. 'You certainly have it all worked out.'

'You said it couldn't be done. I'm only telling you one of half a dozen ways in which it could. This is the way it could have been done by Rupert.'

‘Well, all right then—Rupert. What about the note?’

‘No note, of course. An excuse to get himself out of the room.’

‘Why?’ said Giles.

‘Ah, why? To deal with the policeman? The policeman, on his beat, had seen something, perhaps?’

Giles’ scepticism began to revive a little. ‘Seen what? There was nothing to be seen. Rupert got there a bit early—so what? He makes no secret of it, he’s accounted for it anyway by saying that Uncle Gem ’phoned him. He had no reason to kill the policeman.’

‘I agree,’ said the old man, calmly. ‘And if he didn’t then no doubt he also didn’t kill Mr. Gemminy.’

‘You don’t believe this about Rupert at all?’

‘I told you—this is one way it could have been done—by Rupert.’

‘But then if he’s out—well, there really *was* a note saying that Helen was in danger.’

‘I dare say there was,’ said the old man.

‘But Helen wasn’t in danger.’

‘I dare say she wasn’t,’ said the old man.

‘Then—who put the note there about Helen?’

‘Helen put it there,’ said the old man.

A tough girl. A girl trained to ride and climb, to shoot straight, to throw straight—a girl beating boys at their own games. A girl in love, whose guardian disapproved of her romance and had the power to end it for ever—he who knew the secrets of so many pasts. A girl with half an hour to work in, between one interview and the next.... ‘Am I getting warm?’

That cold shudder again, that sickness at the heart, when Helen’s name was dragged forward into the ugly light. ‘Of course not,’ said Giles. ‘It’s all nonsense. How could she have done it? She was nowhere near when the

door was broken down. And in that case the bolts really were drawn, inside.'

'Oh, well—bits of string passed under the door, you know—all that lark. The door was destroyed by fire and the bits of string with it. One good reason why the fire was ever started at all.'

'But the knife wound! The broken glass!'

'The glass was broken in advance, of course—a hole two feet in diameter. And the victim, dying or dead, tied to his chair—with his back to that hole in the glass. For the rest—a warehouse roof opposite: a narrow yard. She could throw straight, couldn't she?—a knife no doubt, as well as anything else. As to the breaking glass—why assume that the glass was broken, at the time they heard it breaking, from the *inside*? After all, there was some as we've just seen, inside the sill. She'd be pretty handy with a catapult, I dare say? You boys will have seen to that.'

'Why should she have done it? Why should she do such a thing? Why all this—mystification?'

'To mystify. To make it all happen when she was supposed to be nowhere near.' He looked into the young man's white face curiously. 'It's only a game,' he said. 'We're only playing a game. But you don't like even to hear it said.'

'I've heard it said several times already,' said Giles, 'when it was not a game. The police are not fools, you know, either. Only—not being fools—they asked themselves two further questions. Why leave the note—?'

'To make Rupert do just what he did. Run out and leave himself without an alibi for the time the policeman was killed.'

'—and so that brings us again to: why kill the policeman, anyway?'

'The policeman came from the station just across the road from the office. As he pedalled off to his beat—may he not have glanced up and seen

—a boy on the roof of the warehouse with a catapult...? But when the news of the murder broke—then he'd have to put two and two together, wouldn't he? So she had to shut his mouth. She'd recognise him? Like the rest of you, she'd know all the chaps at the station, at any rate by sight?'

'Yes, we all knew him. And by the same token,' said Giles, 'a strapping great chap he was. So how—?'

'You told me she was a tough girl,' said the old man.

'Tough enough to drag him, dead or dying, to that place a hundred yards away from the call box, heave him into that tank...?'

'That has to be accounted for,' acknowledged the old man with an odd glance.

'And the knife—if she'd thrown the knife, it would still have been in the wound when the police broke in. She wasn't in the room, to take it away. You'll hardly suggest, I suppose,' said Giles, heavily sarcastic, 'that she yanked it back with a piece of string? Or some sort of boomerang knife, perhaps...?' He relaxed against the hard back of the bench with an absurd relief. 'You old devil!—you never really believed she killed Uncle Gem.'

Bright eyes, alight with mockery: not very kindly mockery. 'No. Not that.'

'And so—we come to A.N.Other?'

'And the boomerang?'

'Boomerang—what boomerang? What I said just now—a boomerang knife? I was only joking.'

'Not a boomerang knife, no. Just any old boomerang.' He left it at that; sat for a long time, thinking. 'We have at this stage, I take it, all the information the police had to work on. True or false. So... So I put myself in the position of the police; and I think what I do is to ask myself what are the most important questions. And I think I reply to myself as follows: First

—why was the policeman killed? And secondly—why was he killed in the way he was?—why were both men killed in such a way?—strangled, tied up and then, dying or already dead, stabbed in the back. And thirdly, why did both ring up with this strange phrase about something vanishing into thin air?—and what was meant by the horrible screaming about the long arms? And fourthly—why, when Rupert says that he showed the note to somebody, does everybody deny having seen it? And fifthly and sixthly and seventhly and for ever ad infinitum, the most important question of all: in that room that afternoon—dead man locked in, wound still bleeding, window just broken, desk in flames and all the rest of it—why did someone call out that he was going for the fire brigade? And he asked again, like a child playing a drawing-room game: ‘Am I getting warm?’

‘Very warm now,’ said Giles. ‘Very warm.’

‘The call to the police station said that the room was on fire. Surely to goodness, while the men rushed across the street to the rescue, they could leave it to the remaining staff to follow the obvious routine and send for the fire brigade?’

‘Fire or no fire,’ said Giles, ‘if you get any hotter you’ll burn yourself.’

‘And P.C.Cross had not been seen since he’d left after his midday dinner and gone off to his beat?’

‘Scorching,’ said Giles.

‘Which brings us back to the boomerang, you see.’

‘I don’t know what you mean by this boomerang.’

‘Only that it’s an Australian word; and when you used it a moment ago, it made me think. Because ‘dinkum’ is an Australian word too, isn’t it? And that was the policeman’s nickname, wasn’t it? Dinkum Cross.’

We used to think that the ones he encouraged to emigrate were the ones with really dangerous pasts.

A child with a bad background, sent away for his own safety and peace of mind. Returning in manhood, under the wing of the kindly old guardian, joining the police force with his help and encouragement—a Gemminy Cricket like the rest of them, unacknowledged as such only lest the past should catch up on him still. Through his work coming in contact with his brother Crickets; getting to know Helen, his sister Cricket: falling in love. His heredity such that their guardian would never permit a marriage between them.

‘Helen, of course, would have told him all about the arrangements for that afternoon; she could hardly have been so incurious as you men all seemed so innocently to suppose, when it was her business you were going to discuss. From the corner of the warehouse yard, he watched you come and saw you leave. Mr. Gemminy observed him there, rang up Rupert and told him to hurry, there’d been something rather odd going on under the window—’

‘He could have rung across to the police.’

‘But he had this young man’s secrets still to respect.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Giles. ‘That would have been in character. So?’

‘So he rang Rupert. And in the middle of the conversation the murderer came into the office.’ He broke off. ‘Still hot?’

‘Very hot; but also very cold,’ said Giles.

‘Still, let’s go on through with it. He must work fast—our murderer—because he hasn’t as much time as he’d hoped, Rupert’s been warned, he’s on his way. He strangles the old man, stabs him for good measure, set the desk alight, smashes the hole in the window to create a draught and fan the flames. And it’s done: his secrets are burnt to ashes, the only one in the world who was aware that they even existed is dead. No one knows who he is, not even Helen will connect him with Thomas Gemminy, let alone with

his murder. He closes the door and is starting to hurry off down the stairs when he hears—?’

‘He hears Rupert arriving, I suppose,’ said Giles. ‘It’s too late to escape that way; and there’s no other.’

‘What would he do?’ said the old man. He thought that one over too, unhurriedly. ‘I think he would dodge into the nearest room—would that be your office? Oh, Rupert’s, well it makes no difference—he’d dodge in there, meaning to wait until Rupert was inside the smoke-filled room trying to cope with what he found there—and then slip out and away down the stairs before he called the police. But—’

‘But?’

‘But he’d locked the door. An automatic gesture, a symbolical gesture, closing the door upon the terrible past and the terrible thing he’d done to conceal it. He’d locked the door of the murder room, simply not thinking; and Rupert couldn’t get in.’

‘And he was a few feet away in Rupert’s room—and couldn’t get out?’

‘Until—?’

‘Until a whole lot of men in blue uniform just like himself came pounding up the stairs and started banging at the locked door. Who was to notice in that confined space on the landing, with smoke already belching out from under the door, that they had been joined by another of themselves, all barging, heads down, one, two, three, all together now! against the door. And someone says something about bolts and he thinks very quickly; and stoves in the panel and thrusts in his arm and pretends to draw them back. But surely,’ said Giles, ‘he wouldn’t really have gone unrecognised?’

‘The room was on fire, filling with dense smoke; doubtless no one would notice if you kept a handkerchief up to your face—probably they all

were doing it. Voices were choking and unrecognisable—voices saying something about fire extinguishers, something about going for the fire brigade....’

‘So as to get out of the room?’

‘There you have it, boy. And how clever after all! Not a suspect escaping, you see, but just one of themselves, shouting to the man at the top of the stairs that he’d been sent—and something about the fire brigade. He’d tried a better way; while he waited in the other room, he’d scrawled the note about Helen, hoping to be allowed to go after Rupert when Rupert, predictably, dashed off. But that one didn’t wash so he had to fall back on the fire brigade. For improvisation, it wasn’t too bad.’ He humphed and smiled. ‘Hot?’

‘In parts,’ said Giles. ‘One small point, however, strikes a little chill. What about Uncle Gem’s ’phone call to the police? What about these strange remarks—vanishing into thin air, the long arms....’

‘Your Uncle Gemminy’s—? But my dear fellow, good heavens! you haven’t got the point at all. You don’t suppose...?’ He broke off rubbing his thick hands together with a self-satisfied chuckle. ‘Just put yourself into the picture, boy! Rupert beating on the door. Murderer crouching in a room a few feet away: in Rupert’s own room. And very soon indeed, what is Rupert going to do? He’s going to stop panicking, dear boy, he’s going to use his loaf—he’s going to come to his own room and telephone to the station just across the way. Only one thing will prevent him—and that is the arrival of the police, before he calls them. So... From the window, the murderer can see down into the canteen—half a dozen chaps there who will, as he knows from his own experience, leap up and come dashing to the scene of an emergency call—if it’s urgent enough. So—the gasping and the choking—to disguise the voice—the mystification of a lot of nonsense about long

arms and thin air. And duly—over they come; and in due course also, as we've seen—off he goes!’

‘To a telephone booth where he binds and gags himself, rings up the police with a message almost identical with the earlier one and then moves on to a convenient hiding place and there quietly murders himself?’

‘Murder?’ said the old man. ‘Would you call it murder?’ And he turned his big frame so that he stared directly into the tense, white face. ‘I thought you would be more likely to regard it as—an execution.’ Giles sat up very straight. ‘Are you suggesting that *I*—?’

‘You were up on the heath, dear boy; you have your alibi and there’s no breaking that, if people actually confirm having seen you there.’

‘Rupert then—?’

‘But could Rupert have known who had murdered your guardian?’

‘Nobody could have known at that stage,’ said Giles. ‘No one even knew that Uncle Gem had been killed, except for the police—and of course the murderer. How could somebody kill the murderer, by way of revenge, when nobody else knew there had even been a murder?’

‘Perhaps the murderer himself told somebody?’

‘Told who? He’d hardly have come to Rupert or me—’

‘No,’ said the old man. ‘So who *would* he have gone to?’

‘Dear God!—you mean he told Helen?’

‘Need he actually have told her? But... You see, may he not well have had an assignation with Helen for that afternoon—that important afternoon when their joint future was being discussed. She has a date with you, but she’ll ditch that, pretend she confused the meeting place. And... Well, she is waiting for him somewhere near that telephone booth. Something shows in his face perhaps; or in his manner; and we know there was blood on his uniform—traces were found despite his having been in the water.’

‘The blood was from the knife. Why should he have brought away the knife?’

‘To defend himself, perhaps? Maybe Rupert had a lucky escape not actually meeting him on the stairs. Or maybe he was frightened of leaving finger-prints—we know he was hurried, he had less time than he’d bargained for—Mr. Gemminy would have warned him, very likely, that Rupert was on his way. The old man wouldn’t die quick enough, perhaps, so he snatched up the knife—that would explain why two methods were used. But then—had he been careful enough about prints? If they’re found on the knife, that’s the end of him. So he plucks it out of the wound, wraps it round with something, conceals it under his uniform jacket...’

‘And Helen?’

‘Helen goes close up to him to embrace him—feels the hard ridge of the knife against his chest....Or he drops it, perhaps—he’ll have been pretty nervous, no doubt. At any rate she deduces what has happened—gets it away from him and in her rage and agony about her uncle, strikes out at him—’

‘The man was strangled,’ said Giles, white-lipped.

‘Are they sure which happened first?—after the immersion in the tank, I dare say it wasn’t easy to be certain. Anyone can stab a man in the back; and once he was weakened by the knife wound, it wouldn’t be too hard for a strong young woman to finish him off. And that might explain how she got him to the final hiding place—dragged him along, still alive but stupefied by pain and weakness, tied him up when she got him there and once he was totally helpless—’

‘Dear God!’ said Giles. He fought against it, the very thought was revolting. ‘The telephone call—’

‘At the knife point? Perhaps he’d told her how he’d tricked the police with the faked call from Gemminy’s office, perhaps he’d confessed it all—freely or at the knife point, as I say. So she forced him to do the thing again, use the same phrases, carry on the mystery, the strangeness, the hint of some horrible magic that he’d already begun when he’d impersonated Mr. Gemminy.’ He looked suddenly, keenly, into the white sick face. ‘My dear boy—it’s still only a game, isn’t it? Or if it’s the truth, you surely can’t go on caring for such a girl? Yet you can’t even bear to have her name mentioned in such, a connection.’

‘You could hardly expect it,’ said Giles. ‘I’ve been in love with her all my life. To ask me to accept...’ His mind was sick, swooning with the horror of the thought of it. ‘That even for revenge, even in a red hot rage she could do such a thing—’

‘Better, all the same than doing it dispassionately; not in grief or anger but deliberately, in cold blood?’ And he asked: ‘What, after all, did you know about this girl? What if it was really a case, not of what Mr. Gemminy could tell Helen about her lover, but what he could tell the lover about *her*?’

The sun was going down, it was growing a little chilly. ‘Let’s walk up and down just one more turn and then we’ll go in and have tea.’ And he got up, seized Giles by the arm and walked with him again along the sanded path. ‘This young policeman—his past can’t after all have been so very bad? He’d been brought back to this country, encouraged by your uncle to join the police force; or only permitted, but at any rate your uncle knew all about it. Would the old man have been so rigidly, so positively against the marriage if there hadn’t been something on the other side also? Or perhaps it was *only* on Helen’s side that the bad heredity lay? Perhaps he knew that she should not marry at all?’

‘She’s as good as gold,’ said Giles. ‘As good as gold.’

‘But we’re speaking not of *her* sins but of the sins of her forefathers.’ Giles jerked away his arm but the old man caught at it again, and held him fast. ‘Supposing Helen was not in love with the policeman at all? Supposing it was one of you two, yourself or Rupert?—she was just teasing you, making you both jealous, playing hard to get. But Mr. Gemminy doesn’t know that. He sees the young man below the window, watching, wondering what’s being said up there about him—and Helen. He calls him up—and tells him for his own sake as well as for Helen’s, that two such heredities shouldn’t mix. So the young man—predisposed, you see, by his own bad heredity—kills him. And coming to her with the blood of her beloved guardian still fresh on his hands, reveals that he now knows secrets of her own past—and if she will not “consent unto him” as the Bible says, may he not well reveal these secrets to prevent her marrying anyone else? Would you have married her under these circumstances? Would Rupert? Would you not always *have* been looking over your shoulders, asking yourselves what your children would become...?’ He was silent again. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘that this perhaps was not an execution, though that may have been the excuse that the killer gave, even to herself. I think it was like the setting fire to the desk—a safety measure.’ And his bright old eye swivelled again to the set face. ‘Am I not getting very hot?’

‘You are getting as cold as ice,’ said Giles; very cold himself. ‘You were burning your fingers but now you have taken your hand away from the truth, and you’re cold again.’ And he pointed out: ‘The whole object of the exercise was that Uncle Gem wanted to “keep it in the family”—he *wanted* her to marry either Rupert or me. And he’d hardly have done that if her heredity had been so bad that she would commit murder to keep it a secret.’

They had come to the end of the path; turned now and started back towards the great spread of the mulberry tree and the bench beneath. From

afar off a gong sounded; and below them as they started down the incline of the little hill, gardeners were straightening up, hands to loins, stretching, looking about them, gathering up their tools. ‘So,’ said the old man, ‘we are to leave Helen out of it, are we?’

‘Of course,’ said Giles. ‘As if Helen...’ And the hot white mist that invaded his mind always at the thought of Helen accused, welled up now like a miasma and sickened and stupefied him. When he emerged from it, the old man had embarked again upon his five questions. ‘Only they have perhaps changed a little bit now in order of importance. We asked ourselves why none of the police admitted having been shown the note about Helen, and we asked ourselves why someone should have gone for the fire brigade which would have been already on its way: and we found the answer to both questions—the murderer failed to get himself out of the room by the one means and resorted to the other. And we asked ourselves the meaning of those strange phrases about “vanishing into thin air” and “the long arms”—and we know now that they were only dragged in to confuse the issue. And we asked ourselves why your uncle was killed in the way he was—tied up, strangled, stabbed—and we know that this also was to cause confusion: that all the details of the recent stabbing and the newly broken window and the undrawn bolts, were all to cause confusion, to suggest that he had at that moment been killed by someone inside a locked room which in fact proved empty. But we asked ourselves one question which has not yet been answered and this now becomes the crucial question—why was the policeman killed? Because when we outlined an otherwise water-tight case against Rupert, this was the point that exonerated him. Rupert had no reason to kill the policeman.’

Giles walked beside him, slowly, supporting the shuffling steps down the gentle slope. ‘You are very hot now. Burning. Because, yes, that is the

crucial question. Why was the policeman killed?’

‘To avenge the murder of your Uncle Gemminy,’ said the old man. ‘What other reason could there possibly be? And that means—one of you three: you or Helen or Rupert. But you’re out of it, that we do know; and I accept that Helen also is out of it—all that was only a tarradiddle because you challenged me, you said she couldn’t have done it. So we have to come back to Rupert.’

‘And come back to the question you asked before. Why should Rupert have killed the policeman? Revenge, you say. But how could he have known that the policeman was the murderer?’

‘Because in searching for Helen,’ said the old man, ‘he simply did the obvious thing. He stopped every policeman he saw and asked if they’d seen any sign of her. And recognised the man he’d shown the note to—back there in the murder room.’

And he dropped Giles’ arm and turned and faced him, the big, lined face alight with triumph. ‘Now am I hot?’ he said.

And the white mist was back, brilliant and stupefying, pierced through with pain. And out of the mist, Giles heard himself answering: ‘Yes. White hot.’

Rupert—whom also she loved, though surely one might believe, surely one might even yet hang on to the knowledge: not as she had loved himself. Rupert whom their guardian had chosen to be the favoured one. In Giles’ mind now, the white light blazed: the white mist that came ever more frequently nowadays, to flood his mind with its terrible brilliance, its terrible pain. ‘Am I hot?’ asked the old man, still playing the game, the game of Hunt the Killer which suddenly was only ugly and frightening, to be covered over and, please God, forgotten—the game which, unless something were said now, firmly and finally to bring it to an end, would

never be covered over, never forgotten—never forgotten by this heavy old man with his cruel, sadistic mind, playing over old agonies like a cat with a mouse. And so: ‘Am I hot?’ he said; and ‘White hot,’ Giles answered conceding victory. ‘The end of the game.’

‘Yes,’ said the old man. ‘The end of the game. And the beginning of reality.’ And he hooked a veined old hand into the trembling arm and started the long stroll in towards a nice hot cup of tea. ‘I told you I’d heard many murder confessions,’ he said. ‘Now tell me yours.’

No answer: only the terrible trembling, the terrible, uncontrollable shaking of the arm he held, of the whole suddenly sick and shambling body. He prompted: ‘The policeman first—for perhaps the oddest reason ever known for killing a policeman: that you wanted to borrow his uniform. Knowing in advance what your Uncle Gemminy was going to say—’

Knowing in advance what Uncle Gemminy was going to say: because you remembered that night, you knew all about that long ago night—that you had within you the seed passed down through the generations, the terrible seed. The hot white light which, off and on, had visited him since that hideous night of his childhood, had taken possession of Giles’ whole mind now: brilliant, dazzling—confusing yet clarifying, muffling all emotion, intensifying thought....One thought paramount: that Helen would be lost to him, that as always Rupert would win, that she would turn from him, back to Rupert whom also she had always loved....

The plan emerging: long thought-out, elaborate, nursed to perfection, a wish, a dream, a game, growing insensibly into a reality of purpose, springing into action because it must be now, today, this moment, if ever it was to be set going at all. Kill a policeman—no, don’t kill him immediately, he must not seem to have died until after his uniform has been used and returned to him. Tie him up then—choose a man who knows you well (that

young chap that's been making sheep's eyes at Helen recently—he'll do; and serve him right!)—and, knowing you, will trustingly come with you into the derelict building if you tell him some story of strange goings-on there: who'll trustingly turn his back. Wearing his uniform, get to the office—World Cup day, not a soul about; and anyway, who notices a uniformed copper going about his every-day duties? Kill Uncle Gemminy, silence him for ever—he who alone knows the seed of madness you carry within you, he who alone knows that you should never marry, never bring tainted children into the world....Tie him to his chair: for good reasons you must tie up the policeman and also stab him—an 'uncanny' resemblance between the two murders will confuse the issue; and you can throw in a few strange references when you make your necessary telephone calls, cast over it all an air of nether-world horror.

Ring Rupert, ask him to come quickly; you well know Uncle Gem's mannerisms and for the rest, pretended alarm will disguise your voice. Ten minutes now, before he—hurrying—will arrive. Break the window, keep back a piece of the glass. Set fire to the desk. A moment before Rupert is due, ring over to the police station with wild talk of a mysterious attack, so urgent as to bring them all tearing across: you know their habits, you have watched them from your window, often enough, snatching up their helmets, tumbling over one another to answer a hurry-call; and there must be several of them, that is the essence of your plot. Now the desk is well alight, the room filling with smoke, the doors bolted. As Rupert's fist begins to pound, inflict the stab wound, observe the satisfactory trickle of blood, showing how recently the wound was made. Take out the knife, wrap it in the plastic sheet you have brought for the purpose and button the whole tight inside your uniform jacket. If Uncle Gemminy's blood is on the uniform, the fact that this same knife was used to kill the policeman will account for it; no

one must catch the smallest glimpse of the fact that that uniform was in the office at the time Uncle Gem was killed.

Move back to the door, stand to one side and wait. They break in the panels at last, stand back a moment for the final onslaught—and in that moment you fling the piece of glass you have preserved from the broken pane. You are lucky in actually hitting the remaining glass and setting it vibrating; but all that you really needed was the sound, the sound of someone smashing that hole in the window and diving out ‘into thin air’.

And the door gives, opening back against you as you stand flattened against the wall; and as the men surge forward, you surge forward with them. In that smoke-filled room, filled with blue uniforms—who will observe that one blue uniform came, not through the door but from behind it....

Rupert is there with them, of course, and now you have a little extra bit of luck to add to that alibi about having seen him leave the flat. You have noted where his car was parked, of course, and for the rest you could deduce that he’d rush out in a hurry—you’ve arranged for that by the telephone call and you know your Rupert; (his being early made no difference either way, of course—all you wanted was to be able to pretend this alibi for yourself, to describe Rupert rushing out, to know pretty exactly at what time that would happen; and it had the added advantage of your knowing just how long it would be before he arrived.) And now you observe that he can’t even have stopped to put on his macintosh. As you stand with your handkerchief up to your face, against the smoke and the heat, he comes up close to you, he shows you the note about Helen, and you are able to see that the shoulders of his light jacket are soaked through. (You must look round the flat and just see that he did take the mac. even if he didn’t wait to put it on.) Meanwhile, he’s reacting to the note as you knew

he would—rushing off to look for Helen without stopping for a moment's thought. The sergeant won't let you follow him, as you'd rather hoped; so you shout out something not too specific about the fire brigade and, not waiting for consent or refusal, dash off, flinging a word to the man on duty at the top of the stairs. And from then on—a uniformed bobby, hurrying about some professional duty—slowing down as you get clear of the building, just a man strolling his beat. Back to the derelict factory, get the constable back into his uniform—easier when he's alive than if he were, literally, a dead weight. Finish him off, heave him into the water tank: the longer they take to find him, the harder to deduce the time of death, and immersion in the water of course will further confuse it. The old man's blood on the knife will account, as you've planned, for any on the uniform.

Twenty minutes later, you are coming up to the heath, scorching hell for leather along the empty roads. You had intended to knock up the pub people, ask them for change for the public telephone outside; but through the window you can see them all crowded round the television set watching the World Cup final; and what more natural than to tap on the pane—you know them quite well—and make questioning faces, sketch a query mark on the pane: clasp hands in mock prayer as they signal back, 'All square; extra time,' and turn back to huddle over the set again.

Helen safely out of the way, of course; you told her to meet you at the Dell. So you can go to the call box, make the legitimate call to the house to ask if she's there; and then...

Five o'clock; and the policeman has been dead for half an hour and more—yet here is his voice asking for 'George'—you know well enough that George is on the switchboard today—giving his nickname, all the little authenticities... Breaking off with vague alarms, coming back to scream out in gibbering fear that he's being attacked....P.C. Cross: alive and speaking

on the telephone at five o'clock when you are known to be fifteen miles away from the scene of his death.

He had reckoned on suspicion fastening, possibly, upon Rupert; but Helen—that had been horrible....The white light had grown more and more frightening then, blazing day and night inside his mind with a dazzling confusion as when one looks into the eye of the sun and sees only blackness. But this had been a whiteness, infinitely more terrible—a pain-filled, terror-filled radiance that blotted out all but the pain and the terror of the ensuing days. They had been very kind; considering what had happened, they had all been kind. They'd told him that he should not die nor even go to prison, but to a place where he might hide himself from the light inside his head. He'd been afraid of that, afraid of the truths that would face him when he was no longer blinded by the light. But they'd said that he hadn't been—what they called 'responsible'; because of that heredity, because of that very thing that Uncle Gemminy had been going to speak about—because of that long ago day when he had fled, a small boy, shrieking with mortal fear, away from Grandad, standing suddenly in the doorway carrying the great hatchet and stained down his front and all over his hands, with blood....

The gardeners had left the flower-beds and now at a discreet distance followed them; keeping a wary eye also—no point in humiliating and antagonising them, the trick psychs, said nowadays—upon other couples, other little groups all strolling in towards the big, barred buildings ahead; jingling the heavy keys, herding in their charges, sheep-like, to the grazing grounds. The old man stood aside, courteously, to usher the new-comer through the huge door with its wire-netted, splinter-proof glass. 'Well, thank you, I enjoyed that. Someday I'll tell you about *my* murder. Killed off my whole family one night, you know, with an axe. Not my fault; my father

was mad before me, as mad as a hatter. And it's years ago now; my goodness, yes!—when that happened, you'll have been no more than a child.'

The Scapegoat

‘STAY ME WITH FLAGONS,’ said Mr. Mysterioso, waving a fluid white hand, ‘comfort me with apples!’ There had been no flagons, he admitted, in that murder room thirteen years ago, but there had been apples—a brown paper bag of them, tied at the top with string and so crammed full that three had burst out of a hole in the side and rolled away on the dusty floor; and a rifle, propped up, its sights aligned on the cornerstone, seventy-odd yards away and two storeys below.

And at the foot of the cornerstone the Grand Mysterioso tumbled with his lame leg doubled up under him, claspings in his arms the dying man who for so many years had been his dresser, chauffeur, servant, and friend—who for the last five years, since the accident that had crippled him, had almost literally never left his side—tumbled there, holding the dying man to his breast, roaring defiance at the building opposite, from which the shot had come. ‘You fools, you murderers, you’ve got the wrong man!’ And he had bent his head to listen. ‘Dear God, he’s saying—he’s saying—come close, listen to him! He’s saying, “Thank God they only got *me*! It was meant for you.” ’

Thirteen years ago—a cornerstone to be laid for the local hospital, just another chore in the public life of Mr. Mysterioso, stage magician extraordinary. But mounting to the tiny platform, leaning his crippled weight on the servant’s arm, there had come the sharp crack of the rifle shot. And in the top-floor room of the unfinished hospital wing, looking down on the scene, they had found the fixed rifle with one spent bullet. And nobody there. Up on the roof a press photographer who couldn’t have got down to the window where the gun was fixed; down at the main entrance a

policeman on duty, seen by a dozen pairs of eyes tearing up the stairs towards the murder room, moments after the shot. In all that large, open, easily searched building—not another soul.

Twelve—thirteen?—years ago; and now they were gathered together, eight of them—to talk it over, to try to excise the scar that had formed in the mind of a boy—of the boy whose father had been dismissed from the force ‘for negligence on duty’, had ever afterwards suffered from the results of the act that day, and who now was dead.

For the boy had developed an obsession of resentment against the only other person involved, the man on the roof, who nowadays called himself ‘Mr. Photoze’—whose first step on the road to fame had come with the picture he had taken that day of the lion head raised, the brilliant eyes glaring, the outraged defiance. ‘My father didn’t fire that shot—therefore you must have,’ was the burden of the young man’s message, and there had been a succession of threats and at last a physical attack.

They had sent him to see a psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist had muttered darkly about paranoia and complexes and ‘a disturbed oedipal pattern—the boy is subconsciously jealous of the father’s domination of the mother, which seems to have been considerable. He feels guilty towards the father, and now seeks to cover up the recollection of his inner hatred by an exaggerated feeling of protection towards the father, now that the father is dead and unable, as it were, to protect himself.’ A long period of treatment, said the psychiatrist, would be necessary.

Half an hour of treatment, said Mr. Photoze to his friend Mysterioso, would be more like it. Once convince the boy...‘Hold a little court, get together some of the people who were present and talk it out.’

‘The very thing!’ Mysterioso had agreed, delighted. It would be entertaining; he was an old man now, long retired from the stage. It would

give him something to do, sitting here crippled and helpless in his chair all day.

So here they were, gathered together in Mr. Mysterioso's large lush apartment: Mysterioso himself and Inspector Block, who as a young constable had been on the scene of the crime; and a lady and gentleman who had been on the hospital balcony and seen the young policeman running up the stairs after the shot had been fired; and a lady who had been close to the site and seen and heard it all. And a once-lovely lady, Miss Marguerite Devine, the actress, who might also have something to say; and Mr. Photoze. Mr. Photoze was madly decorative in dress, and a half-dozen fine gold bracelets jingled every time he moved his arm.

The boy sat hunched against an arm of the sofa, strained against it as though something dangerous to him crouched at the other end. He hated them. He didn't want their silly help; he wanted to be avenged on Mr. Photoze, who had committed a crime and got off scot-free, as a result of which his father had lost his job and his happiness and his faith in men. And his mind wandered back over the frightening, uneasy childhood, the endless bickering and recrimination over his too perceptive young head; the indigence, the sense of failure... I don't want to hear all this, I know what I know. Because of what he did, my father's life was ruined. I meant all those threats. I failed last time, but next time I'll get him.'

'You do see!' said Mr. Photoze, appealing to the rest of them with outflung arms and a tinkling of gold.

'Your father was never accused of anything,' said Inspector Block. 'He was dismissed—'

' "Dismissed for negligence"—everyone knew what that meant. He lived under suspicion till the day he died. He died with no job and no money; my mother has no money to this day.'

‘We are going to lift that suspicion,’ said Mysterioso. ‘That’s what we’re here for; we’re going to clear the whole thing up. You shall represent your father, Mr. Photoze will be in the dock with you, defending himself. And here we have our witnesses—who also will be our jury. And I shall be the judge. If in the end we all come to the conclusion that your father was innocent, and Mr. Photoze was innocent also, won’t you feel better?’ He said very kindly, ‘We only want to help you.’

The boy watched him warily. He’s not doing this for my sake, he thought. He’s doing it because he wants to be on a stage again, and this is the nearest he can get to it. He’s just a vain, conceited old man; he wants to show off.

A vain man, yes: a man consumed with vanity—enormously handsome once, with the tawny great mane, now almost white, a man of world wide fame, a great performer—and not only on stage if his boastings were at all to be trusted—despite the fact that the car accident at the height of his career had left him unable to walk more than a few steps unaided. It was whispered behind mocking hands that on romantic occasions his servant Tom had to lead him to the very bedside and lower him down to it. Certainly he was never seen in public without Tom: a walking stick was not enough, and as for a crutch, ‘Do you see me hopping about playing Long John Silver?’ Close to Tom, gripping Tom’s strong left arm, the lameness was hardly noticeable. On stage he had continued to manage brilliantly with the aid of cleverly positioned props which he could hold on to or lean against. It was a total lack of strength only; he suffered no pain...

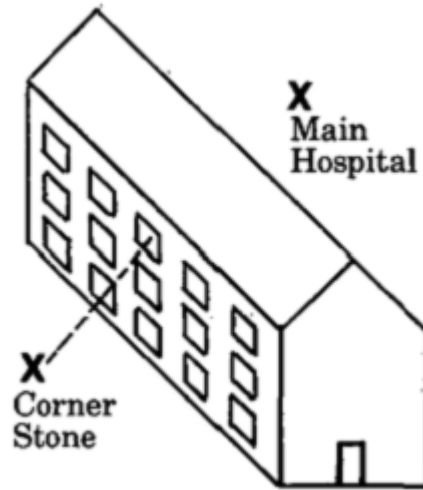
He gave three knocks on the table by his side—the three knocks that usher in the judge in Central Criminal Court Number One at the Old Bailey. ‘We’ll take first the evidence of the police.’

Inspector Block, paying lip service to all this foolishness, was interested nevertheless to see the outcome. ‘May it please your lordship, members of the jury. Twelve years and six months ago, almost to this very day, the police were shown an anonymous letter which had been received by the famous stage magician, Mr. Mysterioso. It was the first of a dozen or so, over the next six months. They were composed of words cut out from the national dailies, and enclosed in cheap envelopes, varying in size and shape, posted from widely differing parts of the country. I may add here that no one concerned with the case appeared to have had the opportunity to post them, unless of course it was done for the sender by different persons. At any rate, the letters were untraceable. They were all abusive and threatening and evidently from the same person; they were all signed ‘Her Husband’.

‘Mr. Mysterioso made no secret of having received them, and there was a good deal of excitement as each new one arrived. The police gave him what protection they could, and when in June he came down to Thrushford in Kent to lay a cornerstone, it was *our* turn—I was a young constable then and didn’t know very much about it, but it was rather anxious work for my superiors, because he had done a brief season at the theatre there a couple of years before.

‘It was arranged, therefore, to cover certain points round the site of the ceremony. The cornerstone was for a new wing. A second wing, completed on the outside but not on the inside, lay between the cornerstone and the main hospital building.’ He drew a plan in the air, a circular movement with the fiat palm of the right hand for the main building of the hospital, a stab with the forefinger of the left hand for the cornerstone, and a sharp slash with the edge of the hand for the unfinished wing lying midway between

them. 'It was from a middle window on the top floor of this wing that the shot was fired.'



And he described the unfinished wing. A simple oblong; ground floor and two storeys, with its main entrance at one end. This entrance had no door as yet, was only a gap leading into a little hall out of which the stairs curled round the still-empty lift shaft. A sloping roof of slate surrounded by a ledge with a low parapet.

'It was an easy matter to search it. Except on the top floor there were no interior walls, and up there only half a row of rooms was completed—each floor was designed to have a central corridor with small rooms leading off both sides. There was a lot of stuff about, planks and tools and shavings and so on, but literally nowhere big enough for a man to hide. It was searched very thoroughly the night before the ceremony and less thoroughly the next morning, and a constable was placed at the main entrance with orders not to move away from it.'

'And he didn't move away from it,' said the boy. 'That was my father.'

Inspector Block ignored him. 'The order of events is as follows: one hour before the ceremony, Mr. Mysterioso arrived, and the Superintendent

explained the arrangements to him. Their way to the main hospital building, where the reception committee awaited him, led past the entrance of the unfinished wing. Just outside it a man was speaking to the policeman on duty.'

'The *murderer* was speaking to the policeman on duty,' said the boy.

'This person was well known to the police,' said the Inspector, ignoring the young man again, 'as a press photographer—not yet calling himself Mr. Photoze. He wanted permission to go up on the roof and take pictures of the ceremony from there.'

'Always one for the interesting angle,' said Mr. Photoze archly.

'The Super was about to refuse him, but Mr. Mysterioso recognised the man and said he should be permitted to go up. So he was carefully searched for any weapons, and it ended in all of them going up to the top floor together. Mr. Mysterioso, of course, had his man, Tom, to help him.'

'We'd been together so long,' said Mysterioso, 'that really in the end we moved like a single person, always running a sort of three-legged race. I had no pain from this thing, it was only a total lack of strength. A couple of flights of stairs was nothing to us.'

You couldn't get on with it, with these people, thought the Inspector. They all wanted to exhibit. 'At any rate, they went up,' he proceeded, letting a little of his irritability show. 'There was a trap door, the only exit to the roof, and Mr. Photoze, as we now call him, was helped up through it with his gear. At that moment Tom came down the corridor, having left his master standing propped up against the window-sill in one of the little rooms, looking down with interest at the site. Tom said he didn't like it, that he felt uneasy about the whole thing; the man shouldn't have been allowed up. Someone—I think in fact it was P.C. Robbins, the man on the door, this young man's father—suggested that there was a bolt which could be shot

from the inside, locking the photographer out on the roof. So this was done. Mysterioso was waiting for them at the door of the little room, and they went on to the cornerstone.

‘And then—it happened. The guest of honour went up the four shallow steps that led to the platform in front of the cornerstone. There was a shot, and both men fell. A minute later Tom, the servant, died in his master’s arms. As he died he was heard to say: “Thank God they only got me! It was meant for you.” ’

‘He said it over and over,’ said the woman who had been near the site. ‘Over and over. It was so dreadful, so touching—’

‘Let us hear from our witnesses later,’ said Mysterioso; but he looked down at his hands, lying in his lap, and when she continued, made no further attempt to stop her.

For the woman was carried away, full of tragic memories, and could not be still. ‘I can see them now! A moment before, it had all been so lovely, so sunny and pleasant, all the doctors from the hospital there and lots of guests, and Matron, of course, and some of the nurses, and Mr. Mysterioso looking so magnificent, if I may say so’—she made a little ducking movement which the great man graciously accepted—‘with his top hat and flowing black cloak, as though he’d just walked down from the stage to come and lay our cornerstone for us.

‘And then—they went up the steps together, he on the left. His man walked very close to him, and I suppose that under the cloak his arm was holding tight to his man’s arm; but you wouldn’t have guessed that he was lame at all. They stood there in the sunshine and a few words were spoken and so on; and then the man put out his hand to take the trowel, which was on a stand to his right, and pass it across to his master—and suddenly there was this sharp crack!—and before we knew what was happening, the man

fell and dragged his master down with him.’ And the lifting up of the splendid head with its tawny, grey-streaked hair, the great roar of defiance flung up at the window from which the shot had come...

‘When you think,’ said the woman, ‘what a target he presented! We had all swung round to where the shot came from, and we could see a man up on the roof. Of course, we all thought he was the murderer. And at any moment he might have taken a second shot and really killed the right man this time.’

‘If he *was* in fact the right man,’ said Inspector Block, throwing a cold pebble into this warm sea of emotion. ‘Not all of us were convinced at the time that the shot wasn’t meant for Tom.’

‘For God’s sake!’ said Mysterioso. ‘Who would want to kill Tom?—my poor, inoffensive, faithful, loving old Tom. And what about the threatening letters? Besides, he said it himself—over and over, as the lady says. He’d have known if he’d had such an enemy, but he said it himself, “It was meant for you.” ’ He appealed to the woman. ‘You heard him?’

‘Yes, of course. You called me close. “Listen!” you said.’ She shuddered. ‘The blood was coming up, bubbling up out of his mouth. They were the last words he spoke. “Thank God they only got me. It was meant for you.” ’

‘And so he died—for my sins,’ said the Grand Mysterioso, and again was silent. But he’s not sorry, really, thought the boy, crouched in his sofa corner, watching the big handsome old face heavy with sadness, and yet spread over with a sort of unction of self-satisfaction. ‘He’s pleased, underneath it all, that everyone should know that even at that age he could still be seducing girls, breaking up homes, getting threatening letters from husbands.’ And certainly in the ensuing years the ageing lion had done nothing to obliterate the public’s memory of that terrible, yet magnificent

day. 'I was so bloody mad, I forgot all about everything but Tom. Dying for my sins!' In a hundred talks and broadcasts he lived it over again, mock regretful, mock remorseful (thought the young man) that a man should have died to pay for the triumphs of his own all-conquering virility. 'I think you're pleased,' the boy said. 'I think you're proud of it. If you weren't, you wouldn't have kept telling people about it all this time.'

'He's got you there, old boy,' said the actress, Marguerite Devine, without venom. 'Literally below the belt,' she added, laughing, and then said: 'Oh, I'm sorry, love!' and laughed no more.

'I know a lot about people,' said the boy, and it was true; the insecurities of his childhood had heightened his perception—solitary, anti-social, he paid no lip service to conventional pretences, was not deceived by them. Life had accustomed him to be ready for the worst.

'Well, the cheeky monkey!' said the old man in a comic accent, trying to make light of it. Inspector Block asked patiently if they might now get on. 'What happened next—'

'*I'll* tell what happened next,' said the boy. 'Because I know it.' You could see the tense clutch of his hands, the tense pressure of his shabby shoes on the soft carpeting of Mysterioso's room; his very skin colour had changed, strangely darkened with hollows ringed round the bright eyes. He was coming now to the defence of his father. 'My father was standing in the doorway where he'd been posted. I've heard him tell about it a hundred times; he was always telling it. He heard the shot fired and ran to the corner of the building and sent one glance at the site and saw what had happened—and don't tell me that in that short time someone could have come out of the building and run away, because they couldn't. Could they?' He appealed to Inspector Block.

‘No,’ said Block. ‘In that short time, anyone shooting from the window where the gun was, could hardly even have reached the top of the stairs. Experiments were made.’

‘Well, all right, so he saw them both fall and he saw the crowd swing round and stare up at the building, so he knew where the shot must have come from and he turned back and ran into the building and up the stairs. He didn’t bother about the ground floor, because he knew the man couldn’t have got there yet; and anyway, it was just an open space, he could see that it was empty; and so was the second floor an empty space.’

‘That’s right,’ said Block. ‘He acted perfectly wisely. Go on, you’re doing fine.’

The tense darkened face gave him no thanks. ‘He went tearing up,’ said the boy, ‘and as he passed the first big window on the stairs looking across at the main building of the hospital, he saw people lying in beds and sitting in wheelchairs out on the balcony—’

They had sat very quiet and intent, those two who had been on the hospital balcony that day long ago—traced and brought here by the dramatic enthusiasm of the Grand Mysterioso to stand witness to what they had seen. ‘Yes, I remember it well,’ said the woman. ‘They’d wheeled us out there into the sunshine. Nothing to see, mind: the unfinished wing cut off the view of the park beyond, and of course, of the cornerstone. It would have been fun to lie there and watch the ceremony, but—well, we couldn’t see it. Still, it was nice to get a bit of. fresh air. This gentleman was on the other side of the partition with others from Men’s Surgical. We were lying there quietly, dozing, enjoying the sunshine—’

‘That’s right. And then suddenly we heard the shot, and half a minute later this policeman comes racing up the stairs of the unfinished wing opposite. There was a lot of glass there, at least there was going to be—now

it was just a huge great open space. He went dashing past, and then something must have occurred to him, because he reappeared, hanging out of the window to shout out to us, clinging to the post with one hand. “Watch the stairs!” he shouted. “Watch that no one comes down!” We were all excited, we yelled back, “What’s happened?” and he yelled, “They’ve shot him!” or “They’ve got him!”—I don’t know which—and then off he went tearing up the stairs again.’

‘What a kerfuffle!’ said the woman. ‘Everyone squealing and hysterical, one of them fainted—we were all weak, I suppose, and I think we thought the murderer would suddenly appear and start taking shots at us from the window—’

‘Or from the roof,’ said the boy.

‘We’re coming to the roof in a moment,’ said Mysterioso patiently. Don’t worry about him, his look said to the rest of them; after all, this is why we’re here. ‘Now—your father went tearing on up the stairs—?’

‘Yes, and came to the top and ran along the corridor. There were a few rooms with their walls up, but the rest was open space—no ceiling in yet, you could see the joists and the slates up over your head. He ran past several of the little rooms that were partitioned—there were no doors or windows in yet—and suddenly in one of them he saw the rifle. A .22, rigged up, fixed, aligned on the cornerstone below.

‘He took just one glance and ran out into the corridor again, to try to find someone. He knew the murderer must still be up there. But there was nobody. And then he heard footsteps coming pounding up the stairs, and it was—well, now he’s Inspector Block.’ Even that seemed to be an injury; his father had never had the chance to become Inspector Robbins.

‘He met me at the top of the stairs,’ said Block. ‘I’d been on duty at the other end of the wing. He said, “My God, there’s nobody here! They’ve

shot him, but there's nobody here!" He looked almost—scared, as though he'd seen a ghost. "There's a rifle fixed up," he said. "Come and look!" '

In the last of the half-dozen little rooms that had so far received their dividing walls, there was a rough tripod formed of three planks. These had been shaped at their ends so that, propped against the skirting boards on three sides of the room, they met and dovetailed to form a crotch into which the butt of the rifle fitted securely. A short length of rope had been tied round the whole, and this was further reinforced by a twelve-foot length of twine, doubled for extra strength, its ends roughly tucked in as though hurriedly done. Into the wood of the window-sill two nails had been driven to form a triangle through which the muzzle of the rifle had been thrust. The whole was trained, steady as a rock, on the site below.

And spilled out of a torn paper bag, too small to hold so many, three out of half a dozen rosy apples had rolled out on the dusty boards of the wooden floor.

'We stood and stared, and as we stood, there was a scraping and scuffling overhead, a small shower of debris, and when we looked up we saw two hands tearing at the slates above us and a face peering through. And a voice said, "For God's sake, what's happening? They've shot him!" And then added, "But, my God, what a picture!" '

The picture that had brought Mr. Photoze fame and fortune: the picture of the famous lion head raised, mouth half-open in that great outraged bellow, heedless of danger: 'You bloody, bloody murderers—you've got the wrong man!'

Usually, for publication, the head was lifted out of the rest, but the whole picture showed the scene moments after the impact of the bullet. First the edge of the parapet, then an expanse of grass between the main building and the cornerstone; the smoother grass where turf had been laid

for the ceremony, the flowering shrubs temporarily planted for the occasion, the tubs of geraniums; the partially built wall with the cornerstone at its centre, the small crowd swung about to stare up, stupefied with shock.

But as the press photographer had exclaimed, in instant recognition of what he had achieved—what a picture! A murdered man, caught in the very act of dying; the hands that held him as famous a pair as existed in the world; and the splendid head, the magnificent, ravaged, upturned face. But the most beautiful thing in the whole photograph, Mr. Photoze assured them now, had been the glimpse in the foreground of the parapet's edge. 'Because if the parapet is in the picture, then I took that picture from the roof and not from the room below, where the rifle was.'

'Anyone can fake a photograph,' said the boy.

'The police confiscated my equipment,' said Mr. Photoze, 'before I had time to do any faking. And before you get any sharper and cut yourself, dear boy, there was no apparatus by which the camera could be left to take pictures all by itself. I wasn't lugging more than I had to up to that roof.'

It was a splendid room—big and luxurious, all just a bit larger than life, like Mr. Mysterioso himself. But the boy sat tensed like a wild thing about to spring, and his tension communicated itself to the rest of them, meeting his sick and angry stare with eyes divided between understanding, pity, and impatience. He resumed his parrot cry. 'You were there. And nobody else was. My father didn't do it, so it must have been you.'

Mr. Photoze was—understandably enough—one of the impatient ones. 'Now, look here!' He appealed to them all. 'I was up on that damn roof. I was there the whole time, anyone could have seen me there—'

'No one was looking,' said the boy. 'They were all watching the ceremony.'

‘And so was I, you silly fool! I was taking photographs—that’s what I was there for. And then suddenly this gun goes off somewhere below me, and I saw the two men fall.’ It was like a film shot in slow motion, he recalled, the two of them collapsing, but slowly, slowly. ‘I stood there frozen, and then I saw that Mysterioso had lifted up his head and was shouting up to the window where the gun was; and I seemed to come to life and started clicking away like mad—’

‘Without a thought that a man was dying?’

‘Sort of reflex action, I suppose,’ said Mr. Photoze. He added simply, ‘It’s my job.’

Mr. Mysterioso had had much cause to be grateful to the photographer who had forgotten all but getting on with his job. The photograph had kept alive the legend of that moment of bravado, of selfless courage on behalf of one who had after all been only a servant. They had remained on friendly terms ever since; it was to him that Mr. Photoze had turned for advice when the young man’s foolish threats had suddenly turned into action. ‘You did quite right,’ Mysterioso said. ‘The show must go on.’

‘And so must this meeting,’ said Inspector Block, tapping an impatient toe.

‘I’m sorry. Yes—well, I went on taking pictures till the crowd surged in and there was nothing to take but the backs of their heads. So then I suddenly thought about the shooting, and I peeked over the parapet, and there, to my horror, I saw the tip of a gun, the barrel, just showing beyond the window-sill. To this day I don’t know why I did it, but I dropped all my gear and ran along the ledge to the trap door, to get down and—I don’t know, *do* something, I suppose. Sheer madness, because imagine if the murderer had still been there! But anyway, I couldn’t get the trap door open. I tugged and I kicked, but—well, we know now that it had been bolted from

the inside. So I ran back to where I'd seen the gun, and what was in my mind then, I think, was that there it still was, still pointing down at all those helpless people—'

'He'd have cleared out long before,' said the boy scornfully, 'while you were taking pictures and running up and down.'

'Well—' He spread artistic, explanatory, jingly hands. 'I mean, one isn't exactly a man of action, is one? I dare say what I thought didn't make much sense. But I did imagine him crouching there with that gun in his hands—of course I didn't know then about the tripod and all that—and all those poor dear people in danger down below. And suddenly I started smashing at the slates, bashing at them with the heel of my shoe, clearing a little hole so that at least I could look down and see what he was doing—perhaps to frighten him off, make him clear out.'

But he had cleared out long ago—cleared out, vanished into thin air. Nobody was there except two policemen, staring back, astonished, into Mr. Photoze's startled face. One said, 'What are you doing up there?'

'He had permission. To take photos. I know him,' said P. C. Robbins. 'He's all right.'

'My poor father—little did he think!' said the boy.

Mr. Photoze collapsed into his chair with an air of giving up. 'I don't know. What can you do? The facts, you silly boy, I've just given you the facts! I was up on the roof, I couldn't get down—it was your own father who pulled the bolt and locked me out. How could I have committed the murder, how could I have fired the gun? Even if I'd wanted to, how could I have done it? We've all just given you the facts.'

The trapped animal, head turning from side to side, seeking a way out. And then—the release. The boy was absolutely still, struck mindless for a moment by the immensity of the idea. He blurted out at last, 'The apples!'

‘The apples?’

‘Who ties a bag of apples at the neck with string? And—yes, there was other string in that room, wound round the tripod and the butt of the rifle, a long piece of string. What for? The rifle was already tied into place with the rope.’ He said to Inspector Block, ‘Was there a nail in the wall opposite the window?’

‘There were nail holes,’ said Block. ‘They were everywhere.’

‘The rifle fixed steady, tied by the rope, aligned on the spot.’ The dark was receding from his face, he was alive with excitement. ‘And tied to the rifle—to the trigger of the rifle—the string; tied with a slip noose, easy to undo afterwards, and the other end of the string tied, stretched taut, with a slip noose to a nail in the wall opposite the window. And a bag of apples—an innocent-looking bag of apples that no one will worry about too much. A little light refreshment for the murderer while he waits?’ he suggested to Inspector Block with a fine contempt.

‘I was a plain copper in those days,’ said Block, ‘and not in the close confidence of my superiors. But I don’t think they took it all quite so easily as that. On the other hand, murderers are funny animals, they have all sorts of cock-eyed reasons for what they do. He could, for example, have been a smoker and didn’t want to draw attention to the fact—leaving ashes and stubs around. So he supplied himself with something to munch, to fill the gap.’

‘Are *you* a smoker?’ said the boy nastily to Mr. Photoze.

‘I have no idea what either of you is talking about,’ said Mr. Photoze.

‘A bag of apples is a funny thing,’ said the boy. ‘Sort of—nobbly. Of course, other things would have done as well, but the presence of a bag of apples on the scene could be explained in lots of ways—for example, something to stop the murderer from wanting to smoke.’ His face, growing

white and pinched now where the dark had been, stared, ugly with spite, at Mr. Photoze. 'I was sure you must have done it,' he said, 'because I knew my father hadn't. But now I know. Because I know how.' And his hands described it, stretched apart, holding taut an imaginary string. 'One end tied to the trigger, one end fixed to the wall. At the right moment, something heavy falling on the string, jerking it down, yanking back the trigger, firing the shot.'

Absolute silence had fallen in the big room. Mr. Photoze said at last, shakily, 'I was on the roof. How could I have dropped the bag of apples down?'

'You admit you made a hole in the slates,' said the boy. 'You dropped it down through that.'

Silence again. Inspector Block said quietly, 'Very ingenious. But your father was in the room within two minutes or less after the shot was fired. The string was wound round the tripod when he first saw it. Who took it down and wound it there?'

'Perhaps his precious father did,' said Mr. Photoze, a trifle viciously, 'having fixed it all up himself. He was supposed to be on duty at the entrance. But no one could see him. Who knows that he was really there?'

'He was seen going up the stairs after the shot was fired,' said Mr. Mysterioso reasonably.

'That's right. To take down the string before Block arrived and saw it.'

The boy was unafraid. 'How could he have got it to work? He was outside the door, three storeys down—we know that, because he was seen coming up. So... Mr. Mysterioso, you're the magician here. How could my father have got the trick to work?'

'There are ways,' admitted Mr. Mysterioso reluctantly. 'Blocks of ice and melting wax and timing machines—after all, he only had to be the first

one on the scene to clear the evidence away.'

'Curiously enough,' said Block, 'the police thought of some of these little ideas too. Considering the length of string—just the width of the room—and the uselessness of it where we found it, as the boy rightly points out, just wound round the tripod, not even knotted—well, we did just think about it. Though I admit that I don't think anyone read this particular significance into the bag of apples. But I do assure you that the place was searched for candle grease and damp patches and timing clocks, till we thought we never wanted to see an unfinished building again. And Robbins, of course, was examined from head to toe, inside and out, till he couldn't have had so much as a spent match concealed about him. You can take it from me—inside and outside, both the building and P. C. Robbins—absolutely nothing.'

'So where does that leave me?' said Mr. Photoze, and immediately answered himself. 'On the roof, dropping a bag of apples through a hole which wasn't there until *after* the shot was fired; when two policemen, including your own dear parent, stood there and watched me make it.'

'For the second time,' said the young man.

Up there on the roof—out of sight, if anybody had been looking that way, which, in the nature of things, they wouldn't be—a photographer fiddling about with the tools of his trade. A slate removed, two slates or three or four—enough to allow him to slip down into the room below, fix up the tripod and the rifle and the taut string, all prepared and left ready previously. Back again, using the tripod as a step to hoist yourself up through the hole and back on to the roof; the bag of apples in his hand. And the shot fired by dropping the bag of apples to pull sharply on the string—then down through the hole again, quickly twist the string round the tripod, and back up on the roof, covering the hole over with the slates before P.O.

Robbins even gets up the stairs. Covering the hole over roughly—anyone entering the little room will be intent on the rifle and the tripod, not looking up. And before they get around to the roof—start battering and scrabbling, smashing the slates, making the hole again—

‘Dear God!’ said Mr. Photoze, and caught Inspector Block’s eye and said again, ‘Dear *God!*’

The boy sat bolt upright in his chair, triumphant. ‘Just tell me,’ said Mr. Photoze at last, slowly, ‘why should I have rigged up all this nonsense? I could just have jumped down through the hole, fired the rifle, and nipped back.’

‘Using what as a hoist?’ said the boy. ‘It’s a long way up to the roof, even to the lower bit of the slope where the hole was.’

‘Oh, well, as to that, with so much ingenuity as you ascribe to me, I think I could have managed something, don’t you?’

The boy ignored the slightly teasing tone. ‘There was something much more important—the photograph. You had to be there to take the photograph, the one with the parapet in it that proves you were on the roof when the gun went off.’

‘So I did!’ said Mr. Photoze; and it frightened the boy a little—how could the man be so easy and unafraid?—with his mocking, half-indulgent admiration, a touch in his voice of something very much like pity. ‘You knew Mysterioso,’ he burst out. ‘He recognised you at the main entrance, it was he who told them to let you go up on the roof. I suppose,’ he added, spitting out venom, ‘that, like all your kind, you revelled in having your picture taken; didn’t you?’

‘I was willing to do him a kindness,’ said Mysterioso mildly, ‘that was all.’

‘Well, it made a change then, if you were,’ said the boy. ‘You’d done him anything but a kindness two years before, hadn’t you?’ And he looked at the rest of them with a triumph almost pitiful because it was so filled with spite. ‘You want a motive?’ he said. ‘Well, I’ll tell it to you—the Inspector could have told it to you long ago, only he protects this man like all the rest have done. All the world knew that Mysterioso had taken Mr. Photoze’s girl friend away from him.’

‘Dear me,’ said Marguerite Devine, ‘would you say that this was where I come in?’

There fell a verbal silence in which even Mr. Photoze lost his recent poise, jangling his golden bracelets with nervous movements of his hands. Perhaps it was their tinkling that led him to say finally, ‘Do I really give the impression of a man who would kill another man for taking a woman away from him?’

‘Speaking from memory,’ said Marguerite, ‘I would say that the answer to that one is—no.’

‘You’ll confirm it, Marguerite?—all I did was to take pictures of you.’ He explained to the ‘court’. ‘I lived in the same group of flats. I was a lodger—with this young man’s parents, us in the basement, her ladyship here in considerably more comfort on the fifth floor. She was a star then, at the top of her career—’

‘Not to say a little over the hill,’ admitted Marguerite ruefully.

‘Do you think she’d have looked at me in that way?—a scruffy little press photographer without tuppence to bless himself with. But she was an actress, she was resting at the time, and all actresses, all that our young gentleman here would call “their kind”, like having their pictures taken. It’s part of their stock in trade. So... It was good practice for me; and in those days, what a marvellous profile!’

‘For “in those days”, dear,’ said Marguerite, ‘much thanks!’ But she added, kindly, to the boy, ‘However, at least an honest face, love, I hope. And in all honesty I tell you—he wouldn’t have killed so much as a fly on account of me.’

‘Well, some other reason then, what does it matter? But he was up on that roof, he could have done it, and nobody else could, so he must have.’

Inspector Block got suddenly to his feet. ‘Now look here, my lad! You’ve had a long innings, you’ve done a lot of very clever talking—now you listen for a change! Your theory is beautifully ingenious, but it has one tiny flaw, and that is, it won’t work. The whole thing depends on a hole in the roof so big that Mr. Photoze could get down through it and then up again. But the police do think of these things too, you know; and that hole was most carefully examined, and the simple fact is that he couldn’t have got his head through it, let alone the rest of him. The slates were securely pegged down and couldn’t be removed; the only hole was the small one he made by shattering one of the slates with the heel of his shoe.’

The boy was taken aback. It had seemed to fit so well, justify all his suspicions. And now nothing was left of it. Back to the parrot cry that had sustained him all this bitter time since his father had died. ‘He was on the roof. There was only him and my father—’

‘That’s right,’ said Inspector Block. ‘Him—and your father.’

You couldn’t call him slow on the uptake. The boy was there before any of them and had sprung to his feet—frightened now, really frightened. ‘You mean—together? In it together?’

The rifle hidden away during the night—it was true that these things, the gun, the bag of apples, the string, might very easily have escaped detection during the more cursory inspection on the day of the ceremony: small enough objects to be lost among the innumerable bits and pieces lying

about in a building still under construction. Up to the roof with Mr. Photoze, then, searched and found free of the impedimenta of murder; he'd have been smuggled up there without permission if none had been given, of course; had they been surprised, those two, in the middle of their plan, when Mysterioso and the Superintendent had come upon them outside the main entrance? Up to the roof, anyway—and the bolt shot that would keep him up there. 'It was P.C. Robbins who suggested that the inside bolt be shot. It left his accomplice, now that he was known to be on the roof, safe from accusation of firing the gun.'

The boy did not argue. There was in his heart now a terrible fear.

Everyone gone off at last to prepare for the ceremony—a clear field. P.C. Robbins leaves his post at the main entrance and nips up the stairs—no patients yet, perhaps, to mark his going, or if there are, after all the passings up and down that morning, who is going to recall one more policeman checking things once again?

Up to the murder room then; a minute and a half to erect the prepared tripod, not more ('We experimented with that,')—to fix the taut string and ('Here it comes!') to pass up the bag of apples through the small hole which meantime Mr. Photoze would have been making by the removal of one slate. And P.C. Robbins is back at his post long before the ceremonial procession is due to pass down again to the site—and he can't have fired the shot because he was at the post when it was fired—any more than Mr. Photoze could have fired it, known to be locked out (and taking pictures) on the roof.

The bag of apples is dropped, and the taut string pulls on the trigger, and the shot is fired; and the one slate is replaced, to be reopened with much scrabbling and shattering when the proper moment arrives; and the photograph is taken. And three steps at a time P.C. Robbins comes pounding

up the stairs to untie the string and wind it—no time for knots—round the butt of the gun, to look as though it had some purpose other than its real one; and is ready to greet P.C. Block arriving, panting, ‘There’s a rifle fixed up. Come and look!’

The boy stared, helpless. Great tears rolled down his thin face, white now and haggard. ‘I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it!’ But to fight was better than to despair. ‘Anyway, what was the reason? My father had no *reason* to do it; so why should he?’

Inspector Block said steadily, ‘Mr. Photoze lived in the same group of flats as this lady did. You were ready enough to accuse *him* of an affair with her. But your father also lived in that same group of flats; and the lady is a very pretty lady. And then—’

‘Oh, come now, darling!’ protested Marguerite. ‘First a photographer—now a policeman as well. Have a heart! I wasn’t very fussy—*but!*’

‘—along came Mr. Mysterioso,’ went on Block, ‘and took her away from them both.’

‘What a happy little threesome we seem to have been!’ said Mr. Photoze.

‘I don’t say you were a threesome—not in that sense. There may be many ways of caring for a woman, needing a woman—many reasons, at any rate, for resenting her being stolen from you.’

‘But I wasn’t stolen from the policeman,’ said Marguerite, half-laughing. And she looked at the boy’s white face and laughed no more. ‘Now, look, Inspector, this is absolutely not fair. I’ve told you about Mr. Photoze—we were both frank enough with you. So believe me when I say, when I swear to you on oath, that as for the policeman, I never set eyes on the fellow in my life. Not till after the shooting: then we all met one another, in connection with the case. But that was all.’

‘So there!’ said the boy passionately. He added with a suddenly rather sweet simplicity, ‘Besides, he was married to my mother.’

‘And loved your mother?’

‘Yes,’ said the boy. (Loved her too much, to the exclusion of oneself—quarrelled with her, yes, but that was—surely?—because of the failure and the poverty brooding in the home; which in turn was because of the crime and subsequent unjust dismissal.)

Inspector Block did not like what he had to say next. But he said it. ‘All right. He loved her. But Mr. Photoze lived with them, and perhaps in his own way he was devoted to her too—enough at any rate to enter into a plot to avenge her. Because’—It was not very nice, but it had to be said—‘Because Mr. Mysterioso had been visiting those flats, hadn’t he? And one lady at a time wasn’t necessarily enough for the Grand Mysterioso.’

‘You flatter me,’ said Mysterioso; but nobody listened to him. For it was terrible—horrible—to see the boy’s face. Before, it had been a young face, dark, pale, as the emotions passed across it. Now it was a man’s face, a clown’s face, a mask of white patched clownishly with pink. That gesture again, as though physical danger were coming close to him. He whimpered, ‘Oh, no! Oh, no!’

‘We have to consider everything,’ said Inspector Block, as though excusing what he did.

‘It’s madness,’ said Mysterioso. He hauled himself straighter in his chair, but he too had gone pale. ‘By all I hold sacred, I never even saw her—not till after the inquiries started.’ He looked with pity at the cowering boy. ‘I never touched your mother, child, never so much as saw her.’

‘You could have,’ said the boy sobbing. ‘You could have.’ His body was bowed over till his forehead rested on his two fists clenched on the arm

of the chair. 'Everyone tells lies—you have to say you didn't know her. But you could have, you may have—'

Marguerite got up from her place. She went and knelt beside him, lifted his head, pushing back the damp, soft, spiky young-boy hair from his forehead; caught at the writhing hands and held them steady in her own two hands, so white and well-cared-for with their long, pink, manicured nails. 'Hush, love, hush! Of course it isn't true.' And she looked across the room at Mr. Mysterioso and said, 'A secret—between us and these kind people here who'll be too generous, I know, ever to give us away.' She glanced at the door. 'Nobody could be listening?'

'No,' said the Inspector.

'Between these four walls then?' She looked round at them, appealing, looked back to Mysterioso. She said, 'I think we must tell.'

An actress, 'over the hill', glad of the attentions of even a scruffy young press photographer using her as a sitter to practise his craft. Thankful beyond words for the advent of a new admirer and a rich, famous, and handsome one at that, 'good to be seen about with' at the fashionable restaurants where theatrical agents and managers would be reminded of her. Entertaining him at home, not at all secretly; dropping naughty hints to anyone who would listen—my darling, he's *fantastic*! Using it all to further her own ends, to bolster her tottering career.

And a man, larger than life size, not quite like other men. Big, handsome, with his mane of tawny hair, a man who looked like a lion and must live like a lion; a man with a reputation for affairs, in middle age still strutting in the pride of his well-publicised virility. And all in an hour, in a moment....The accident that had left him a crippled thing, humiliatingly powerless, had left him powerless in other ways as well. 'She was—kind,' he said, looking at Marguerite, still kneeling by the boy's chair. 'She kept

my secret a secret.’ To the boy he said, ‘Even if I’d ever set eyes on her, my child, your pretty young mother would have been safe from me.’

‘It’s true,’ said Marguerite. She looked down at her hands. ‘I know.’

Inspector Block helped her up from the floor and back to her chair. He said to them both, with something like humility in his cold voice, ‘Thank you.’

The Grand Mysterioso stirred and sighed and came back to the present with a jerk. ‘Well, now... My dear boy, I think you have no cause to complain. We’ve done what we came here to do—talked it all out, put it all before you, all the facts, the ifs and the ands, the probabilities and the just possibles—riddled out our very souls for you, so that you may save your own. So save it! Accept the judgment of this court—who also have heard it all—and get rid of this bug that has been obsessing your mind and spoiling your splendid young life. I’ll help you. I’ll be your friend—you can start all over again, grow-up, be a man.

‘So now—you two have been the accused: you, playing the part of your father, and Mr. Photoze here. Go outside this room and wait; and we will arrive at a verdict in here, all of us, me and Inspector Block and this kind and lovely lady, Miss Devine, and these three kind people who have come here as witnesses, at no small trouble to themselves, to help you too. None of us with any axe to grind, remember that. So—whatever verdict we come to, will you accept it?’ And he said very kindly, ‘All we want, boy, in all honesty, is to arrive at the truth and set your mind at rest.’

‘Suppose,’ said the boy, ‘the truth doesn’t set my mind at rest.’

‘Then we’ll tell it just the same,’ said Block. He made a small-boy gesture, licking his thumb and crossing his heart with it. ‘I swear you shall hear the truth. I’ll tell you no lie.’

‘Considering that I’m in the dock too,’ said Mr. Photoze, getting up and going towards the door with his accompanying jingle, ‘and *I’m* ready to accept the verdict, I think you can too.’ He opened the door. ‘Come along, the jury is about to retire!’

The door closed behind them. Mr. Mysterioso said, ‘Photoze will keep him safely out of earshot.’ But he looked anxious. ‘Can you really swear to tell him the truth of it? For that matter—what *is* the truth of it?’

Inspector Block went and stood in the middle of the room. He said, ‘The truth of it is very short, and very simple. I can tell it to you in’—and he counted on his fingers—‘in fourteen words. In fact, I could reduce those words to six, and give you the whole story. Of course, I could say a lot of other words, but I’m not going to. It’s not for me to accuse. Our business is to exonerate.’ And he spoke the fourteen words. ‘I think the rest is self-explanatory... Verdict unanimous? Let’s have the boy back.’

The big lush room, curtains drawn, hushed in the evening quiet, no traffic rumbling outside, scented with flowers and the upward curl of cigar and cigarette smoke; bottles and glasses hospitably placed within reach of outstretched hands... The door opened, and Mr. Photoze came jangling through, and the boy was standing there, wearing the dark look again, his eyes like the eyes of a frightened animal, his hands tensed into claws. Mr. Mysterioso struggled his helpless limbs forward in his chair and held out a hand. ‘Come over here, son! Come and stand by me.’

He came over and stood by the chair. ‘It’s all right,’ said Mysterioso, and took the narrow brown hand and held it, strongly and comfortingly, in his own. He said, ‘You see it hasn’t taken long. We all recognised the truth immediately. Verdict unanimous.’ And he gave it. ‘Mr. Photoze—not guilty; neither motive nor opportunity. And your father—not guilty. Neither motive nor opportunity. My hand on my heart!’

A sort of shudder ran through the boy. Tears ran down his face as he stood motionless, his head bowed. 'All go!' said Mysterioso. 'I'll look after him. We've done our job. But never again,' he said, giving a little shake to the nerveless hand still held in his own, 'any threats to Mr. Photoze, let alone any violence! You accept the verdict? That's a promise?'

The bowed head nodded.

'Good boy! Well, then, good night to you all,' said the old man, 'and thank you.' And he said, again to the boy, 'I'm sure you thank them too?'

Yes, nodded the hanging head again; thin hand still clasped in the veined old hand, the beautiful, still mobile, veined old hand of the master magician, the Grand Mysterioso.

Mr. Photoze walked away with Inspector Block. 'Well, thank God that's over! I think I'm pretty safe from now on. He gave his promise, and he'll keep it; don't you agree?'

'Oh, yes, you'll have no more trouble,' said Block. 'He meant it. I know these kids; they only need convincing.' He walked a little further in silence. 'What you and I now know,' he said carefully, 'at least I think you know it?—had better be kept secret.'

'Mysterioso and the others know it too.'

'Some of it,' said the Inspector. A vain man, Mysterioso, he added, really one of the vainest he had ever known. 'Of course, as you said, it's their stock-in-trade.'

'After what he admitted tonight,' suggested Mr. Photoze, 'I think much may be forgiven the old man.'

'Nevertheless, through his vanity he's obstructed the course of justice. From the very beginning—from before the very beginning.'

'You mean—the letters?'

‘The letters—anonymous letters signed, “Her Husband”. In all sorts of different envelopes, in all sorts of different type, posted from all sorts of different parts of the country—’

‘Ye gods! And who travelled all over the country constantly, with his act? And who got all that lovely publicity? You mean he wrote them to himself?’

‘No, I think the letters were genuine,’ said Block slowly. ‘Genuine letters in genuine envelopes. I just think the letters didn’t belong in the envelopes.’

Typed envelopes—envelopes that had previously held circulars, impossible to distinguish, even by the senders, from the myriad of similar envelopes pushed day after day through letter boxes up and down the land. ‘He’d just pick one with a Birmingham postmark or a Glasgow postmark or what you will—put the letter in that, seal it up instead of merely tucking it in—the glue would be still intact—tear it open again and then send it off to the police—first taking care to arrange for the maximum publicity.’

‘The publicity I understand,’ said Mr. Photoze. ‘But for the rest—I daresay I’m dense, but why put the letters into new envelopes? Why not just show them as they were?’ And he answered himself immediately, ‘Well, but good God, yes—of course! Because the letters were addressed to someone else.’

Fourteen words: The young man’s father couldn’t have killed Tom. Tom *was* the young man’s father.

While the cat’s away, the mouse will play. How had the indispensable servant spent the long waiting hours, while his master dallied five storeys above?

‘So the letters were really addressed to Tom—Tom Cat, perhaps we should call him from now on. And the shot—But good heavens, that

performance at the foot of the cornerstone?’

‘A performance,’ said Inspector Block briefly.

‘With a dying man in his arms—his friend?’

‘I wonder if the poor neutered cat felt so very warmly towards the full Tom after all? And think of the dividends! The photograph—but that was a bonus—of the great, defiant gesture; the reputation ever afterwards for heedless courage. Some defiance!—he knew perfectly well there wouldn’t be another shot. The murderer hadn’t got the wrong man at all. It was meant for Tom.’

‘But Tom himself said—’

‘Just recall the way that went,’ said Inspector Block. ‘The man was bleeding at the mouth, hardly in good shape for clear articulation. Mysterioso listened, then he called the woman to come close. He told her what the man was saying: “Thank God they only got *me*—it was meant for you.” He told them all. The woman listened to the choked-out words, and believed what she’d been told. No doubt Tom gasped out something like, “My God, he’s got me! He really meant it!”—something like that. Don’t you see, the magician forced the card on her?—she heard what he told her to hear, that’s all.’

‘Some opportunist!’

‘He’d shown that in the matter of the letters. This was only an extension of that.’

‘Tom would bring the first letter to his master—I daresay there weren’t many secrets between those two. I wonder,’ said Inspector Block, ‘what Mysterioso’s first reaction would have been?’

‘Jealousy,’ said Mr. Photoze.

‘I think so too; especially after what we heard tonight. I think Mr. Mysterioso wanted those letters for himself. So—all sorts of good reasons

to the man: you're in danger; this idiot, whoever he is, might try something funny. The police won't bother much about you, but if *I* were to ask for protection—And Tom, after long years in “the business”, would be the first to appreciate, the value of the publicity, the anxious fans, the eager sensation-seekers, flocking to performances with the subconscious hope that something tragic would happen—as they flock to the circus.’

‘Why no letters before that?’

‘I think,’ said Block slowly, ‘that all the way along, this was a crime arising out of opportunity. And here was the first opportunity. The months passed, the baby was born, Robbins fumed and was sick with anger; he couldn't just go and beat up the seducer—he was in the police, and the police wouldn't stand for that sort of thing; and more important, he wasn't going to let the world know of his shame. But then—well, Mysterioso told us that these invitations to lay cornerstones and whatnot were arranged months in advance; and the first people to know about forthcoming events are the local police. Suddenly P.C. Robbins learned that his enemy was coming to Thrushford.

‘Threats at first, meaningless probably, just to give the seducer a bad time, with the vague hope that when he comes to Thrushford with his master, one may be able to add some small frightening shock just to shake him up. But the seducer turns it all to his own advantage, makes a sort of public joke of it, hands the letters to another man. The rankling anger grows and grows and begins to take on a more positive quality. And then the second opportunity presents itself.

‘I don't know which came first—the rifle or the post of duty outside the unfinished wing. Either could have been fiddled, I daresay, having achieved the other. Not too difficult, for example, for a policeman to come by a weapon. Some old lady finds the gun after her husband's death, hardly

dares to touch the nasty dangerous thing, knows nothing certainly of numbers and identification marks, hands it over to the first copper, and thinks no more about it. He may have had it stashed away for years, or from the time his suspicions were first aroused; by the time it came to be used, the hander-over could be dead or senile or have moved elsewhere—certainly it was never traced. At any rate, with it in his possession and a perfect place at his disposal for using it, he began seriously to think about taking action. He thought out a plan, worked on it, and brought it off. And damn near perfect it turned out to be.’

‘No one guessed at the time how the thing was done?’

‘My higher-ups may have; but it was all so tenuous. Still, he’d lived in the flats where Mysterioso had visited; they must have had some suspicions —’

‘Only, I had lived there too.’

‘That’s right. And been on the scene of the crime also. So how to choose between the two of you when it seemed impossible for either of you to have done it? At any rate, they cooked up some excuse and got rid of him—I remember him as a difficult chap, brooding and touchy—well, no wonder! I daresay they weren’t sorry to let him go. It wasn’t till tonight...’ He laughed. ‘It hit you at the same moment?—how it had been done. I remember how you stopped and stared and said, “Dear God!” ’

‘But you went on with the theory about possible collusion—’

‘I had to run through all the possibilities. I had to leave no doubts in anyone’s mind. I didn’t want people coming to the boy afterwards, saying, “He never covered this or that aspect.” But by then, I knew. When the boy accused you of making the hole in the roof *before* I saw you apparently making it—’

‘It accounted for the bag of apples and all,’ said Mr. Photoze. ‘So simple! Wasn’t it?’

So simple.

P.C. Robbins with hate in his heart and a long-perfected plan of revenge. After the major search of the previous day, concealing the rifle, the rope, the string, the apples, preparing the boards for dovetailing into a tripod. Slipping up when the final inspection had been concluded and they’d all gone off to prepare for the ceremony, erecting the tripod, fixing the rifle, winding a length of twine around the butt to suggest exactly what in fact had been deduced—that some trick with the string had been played. (A bag of apples dropped on to a taut string, jerking back a trigger—the nonsense of it! As if anyone for a moment could really depend on anything so absurdly susceptible to failure!) Down again, unseen because there was as yet nobody on the hospital balcony; or if observed, just another copper going about his business; the police had been up and down all day.

And then—

The sound of a shot—in the unfinished wing. A policeman tearing up, two steps at a time, pausing only to yell out, ‘Watch the stairs!’ and ‘They’ve got him!’ Pandemonium, predictably, on the hospital balcony, everyone talking at once, a lot of people ill and easily thrown into hysteria. Noise and confusion, at any rate, masking the sound of—

‘Of the real shot,’ said Mr. Photoze.

‘How do you hide a brown paper bag?—a paper bag that you’ve blown up and burst, to take the sound of a shot. You fill it with too many apples and leave it prominently displayed, with two or three of them apparently rolled out from the tear in the side.’

‘So his father did commit the murder,’ said Mr. Photoze. ‘But in fact he didn’t. Because the man he calls his father, was not his father. So we

could all look him in the eye and tell him that his father was innocent.'

'These trick-psychs!' said Inspector Block. 'Oedipal complexes, delusions, paranoia—looking for a scapegoat for his own guilt feelings towards his dead father, because he had resented him in life, his dominance over himself; been jealous of the father's possession of the mother—all the rest of it. "A long period of treatment!" Damn nonsense! One evening's straight-forward discussion—merely convince the boy that his suspicions are unfounded, and that's all there is to it. From now on, he'll be as right as rain.'

The boy was as right as rain. He was bending over the Grand Mysterioso, lying back helpless in the big armchair. 'If they didn't do it—then you must have. Of course it wasn't you that was meant to be killed—I can see that now; it was Tom. Because it was you that killed him—wasn't it? It has to be. There's nobody else. You were dependent on him—you hated him for that, to be humiliatingly dependent, like a child; *I* know about that, I know what that's like, to be a child and—and hate someone, underneath: and to be helpless. And jealous of him—you were jealous because he was a man and you weren't one any more; you told us about that just now, you and that woman: you gave away how ashamed you were. I know about that too. I was only a child but my—my father was a man.

'I was angry with my father about that, but you—you were ashamed. And so you killed him; it must have been you, there's nobody else. Oh, don't ask me how—you're the magician, you're the one that knows the tricks; you said it yourself, things like melting ice and burning-down candles and a lot of others, I expect, that you carefully didn't mention; but you'd know them all, all right. And there you were with your big cloak, even on such a hot day—all pockets and hiding places...

‘And you were on your own—they left you alone when they went down the corridor and hoisted Mr. Photoze up on to the roof and shot the bolt after him; quite a while they must have been there and by the time they came back you were waiting for them, standing in the doorway of the room—standing in the doorway, blocking off their view into that room with your big body and your big cloak. If you could get across the room from the window to the door, then you could do other things—oh, I don’t know how and I don’t care; you’re the magician, you do tricks that nobody ever sees through and this was just another of them. But you did it. If that fool with his bangles and his photos didn’t, well then, there’s no one else.’

No one else. For a moment there had been no one at all and that had been the worst, that had been the most terrible of all. So this one must not escape. Deep, deep down, perhaps, below conscious calculation, lay the cold knowledge of how tenuous a tether held this last scapegoat safe, the knowledge that this sacrificial goat must be placed beyond power of redemption or he too would be gone. ‘It was you. And for what you did, my father suffered for the rest of his life; it was dreadful, we were so poor, they were always fighting and my father—wasn’t always... Well, sometimes he was unkind, a bloody little bastard he used to call me, and my mother used to cry and cry...’

He went on and on, face chalk white, scarlet-streaked. But he was all right now, ‘as right as rain’. He had found his scapegoat and now forever made his scapegoat safe; and so might love his mother and be loved by her without feeling guilty that his father was dead and could rival him no more. His father had suffered and died, and it had been—horrible—to go on resenting his memory; but now he had avenged his father and he was free.

The spittle ran down from his gibbering mouth and fell upon the upturned face of the Grand Mysterioso. But Mysterioso made no move to

prevent it. The boy had his hands around his throat and he was dead.

No More A-Maying...

THE ROLLING SUMMIT OF the bare Welsh mountain was patched with gorse, standing like sparse tufts of hair on a bald man's head. 'Come in by the bushes, Gwennie,' said Boyo. He had been nerving himself for this for a long time. When they were safe from observation, he blurted it out at last. 'Gwennie! Show me?'

'Show you what?' said Gwennie. There's dense, for a girl of nearly six.

He went very red, having to say it outright but he summoned up all his temerity. 'Show me your chest.'

Gwennie seemed not unduly offended. But... 'How can I show you up by here?' She peered out from the frail shelter of the prickly patch. 'Someone might see us.' And indeed from where they crouched they could see across the valley to her farm, Penbryn. Mam and Da had gone over to Llangwyn for the mart. Ianto would be out in the woods with Llewellyn the Post and Blodwen off somewhere with Nancy James; but their big brother Idris had been left to work in the yard, cleaning out the silo pit, shifting the hay, ready for the new crop. 'Not up here, Boyo. Come down to the cave.'

'If we go to the cave—will you show me?'

In the yard outside the hay-barn, her swing hung idle. 'If I show you, Boyo, will you push me on the swing?'

'Yes, all right,' said Boyo.

'A hundred times?'

'All right, all right,' said Boyo. But a hundred times!

They tumbled down the hillside to the trees that edged the little river; crept across the rough path to the green glade that lay at the opening of the cave. It was not a cave, really, but a sort of rock tunnel that opened out

again where the low bank dropped, grass over crumbling earth, to the water's edge. But when, hidden within the cave's mouth, she had, with much struggling, hauled up her thin cotton dress—nothing! Just a plain old flat chest like his own, two tiny pale pink seed pearls on a flat white front. 'That's not a girl's chest,' said Boyo, disgusted. 'You're not a girl. You're a boy.'

'I'm not,' said Gwennie, indignant.

'Oh well! Let's go in by the river, then,' suggested Boyo craftily, 'and make boats out of leaves and launch them down the running water.' Better than a hundred times pushing her on her old swing. And all for nothing.

But someone was there already. A girl was lying drinking out of the river as they themselves often stooped to drink, lying with her shoulders hunched and her head right down to the water, one arm still on the bank, lying at an uncomfortable angle, turned at the elbow, palm upward. Huge eyed, they clapped their hands to their mouths and backed silently away. 'Boyo—it was your Megan!'

'If she'd seen us!'

'If she knew I'd shown you my chest!'

'She wouldn't tell,' said Boyo, gaining confidence with distance from danger.

'Well, perhaps not. She's funny, that old Megan of yours.'

'Lost her 'ealth,' said Boyo, laconically, in the language of the grown-ups. If you'd lost your health, that was an act of God and no more to be done about it. And Megan had never exactly had her health, not really. Not in her head, anyway. Nevertheless... 'Never tell, Gwennie! Never tell that we went to the cave. If *she* didn't think, other people might. If they guessed that you'd shown me your chest!'

They started back to the farm but for a moment had to shrink back into the bushes hording the path. One of the Hippies came running down into the glade and looked about and called out a name: a funny name, not one that either of them knew—and at last, looking as if he didn't like doing it, hunched his thin shoulders and went into the cave, still calling. They hared away back to the farm as though devils were after them.

The Hippies had bought up a derelict small-holding with tumbledown farm cottage of stone held together by crumbling clay, its chimneys nested by jackdaws, its slate roof caving in. They had restored it, painstakingly, patiently; cleared and tilled the rough ground, planted a garden there, kept chickens and ducks and a goat and an elderly Jersey cow. Emlyn Lewis had cheated them over the cow; but, fair play, Hippies deserved nothing better—an ignorant, thriftless, carefree lot with their beards and long hair and the girls in long untidy dresses and hair hanging all about their shoulders. And immoral! Walking about pregnant for all to see! The men drove around in a shabby van with goat cheese and 'natural yoghourt' and produce from the garden. Who bought enough to make this worth while, remained a mystery. The farmers' wives simply said roughly, 'No!' and turned their stout backs, criss-crossed with the straps of speckled overalls, till, unoffended, the intruders drove away. Summer visitors, perhaps, with their too-bright tents and caravans and lines of washing hung out to dry?—but they were very, very few and far between.

They were toiling in the garden when Christo came back from the cave. They called him that because he was so beautiful with his long face and scrappy golden beard like the face of the Christ imprinted on the sacred veil. He was married to Primula. They were in fact all married; it seemed rather pointless to resist what, after all, comforted their parents and made life so much simpler, especially when it came to the babies. There were

three babies, one to each couple—Christo and Primula, Rohan and Melisande, Abel and Evaine. They all lived well enough on the produce of their land; and Rohan and Melisande sold their pottery to the local shops. They had beautiful names because they had rechristened themselves when they came to settle in Wales. They loved everything around them to be beautiful and if they were sometimes a little intense about it, would also often fall into laughter at their own pomposity. But it was true that their whole intention in forming their tiny community, had been to be beautiful in all ways, all through their lives.

Christo did not look beautiful now. His white face, whose skin never tanned, was all patched and streaked with pink. He gasped out: ‘It’s Corinna! She’s drowned herself!’ and sat down on the bench outside the cottage door and put his face in his hands and burst into tears.

‘Christ!’

‘I was late,’ said Christo. ‘She must have thought I wasn’t coming.’

They stood round him, stricken, the gardening tools still in their hands, stupidly staring—as the foolish wild mountain sheep do, faced, starving, with an artificial feed. ‘Oh, Christo, love!—don’t blame yourself.’

‘She wasn’t—accountable,’ said Rohan, comforting.

The girl was Megan Thomas, daughter of the farmer, who also carried the post; but they called her Corinna, out of Herrick, because she would wander along the hedges picking sprays of the white May blossom, holding it in a sort of ecstasy to her face, feeling the soft brush of the stamens, the caressing roughness of the hidden thorns; snuffing up the strange, musky scent. ‘Corinna’s going a-Maying...’ She was the only one of the farming people who would come near the wicked Hippies. Her Mam told her not to and her Da said he would beat her but she came, nevertheless, and hung about the cottage. Seeing his beautiful face, hearing his name, she had in

her hazy, dazy mind come to fancy that here was an incarnation of Iesu Grist, come again; and now, deeply in a trouble she did not fully understand, had turned to him for help—for comfort, for absolution—who could tell? If he would meet her, down in the glade? They would not go into the cave—Christo suffered violently from claustrophobia, could not endure an enclosed space—the very doors of the house were kept open if he were alone in there. But they must go somewhere secret; if her Da knew, he would beat her. And if he knew—if he knew... ‘My Da would kill me! My Da would *kill* me!’

They had supposed her to be having a baby and advised him that he must at least meet her and try to comfort and advise. If people had faith in one... After all, to love and be kind was the whole foundation of their lives. But now.... ‘Was she in the river?’

‘On the bank. Hanging—hanging over.’ He could not bear to re-live the horror of it, to re-visualise it. He had called to her but she hadn’t been in the glade; had thought he heard a rustling of leaves, seen nothing around him, forced himself to creep through the tunnel to the bank. ‘Her head was in the water, and one arm—one arm was trailing in the water and her hair all like—like seaweed....’

‘Did you lift her out?’ said Abel. Abel was the able one, they used to say, laughing; the alert one, the do-er. Christo—well, really, he was like a child in some ways, such a dreamer, so much at the mercy of emotions too delicate for a man. ‘She was dead. I couldn’t bear to—’

‘You’re certain she was dead?’

‘Oh, yes, yes,’ said Christo. ‘I touched her arm, the other arm. It was—sort of doubled up behind her. It was—cold.’ He shuddered. ‘Her face under the water was all... I couldn’t bear to touch her again, I couldn’t bear the—the oppression of that horrible cave behind me. So I came to tell you.’ But

he stumbled to his feet. 'Just to leave her there!—I shouldn't just have left her there. I should have lifted her out.' He looked at them, sick and guilty. 'I ought to go back.'

'We'll go,' said Abel. 'Rohan and I can go.'

'They'll say he did it,' said Melisande, suddenly. 'They'll say he made her pregnant and then he killed her. They'll say it was Christo.'

They turned upon one another terrified eyes, the whitening of their faces turning the outward tan to an ugly grey. 'Oh, God, Christo—they'll say it was you.'

If Corinna had been 'simple', Christo also was simple; though only perhaps in the sense of an absolute simplicity—those who loved him would have said of an absolute goodness. Now, the thought that he might have injured, let alone slaughtered, any creature in the world, turned him almost faint with horror and disbelief. 'Us so-called Hippies,' said Rohan. 'They'd believe anything of us. They knew she hung around Christo. Her parents had warned her not to.'

Abel said: 'Rohan—do you think she did kill herself?'

'An accident? Leaning over too far and then—? Oh, my God,' said Rohan, 'you don't mean—?'

'If she was pregnant,' said Abel, 'or only if she'd been seduced—because with a girl like that, that's what it would have been—someone else was involved. She said that if her father knew, he would kill her. But what would he do to that other one?'

'Christo,' said Primula, imploring, 'do you think it could have been an accident?'

He considered it, forcing himself to gather-in his flying wits, to concentrate upon recollection. 'Leaning over the bank like that—you could get back if you wanted to. You could lift up your head if you wanted to.'

‘Could a person just force themselves to keep their head under water and drown, Abel, if by just lifting it up—?’

‘No,’ said Abel, sharply resolute.

‘Wait!’ said Primmy suddenly. She ran into the house. The movement, the translation into action, relaxed them, they found themselves standing rigidly holding rakes and hoes: threw the tools aside, rested, sitting or half kneeling, still in their ring, gazing into the sick white face with its fringe of ragged gold. ‘Either way, they’ll still think Christo seduced her. Her father —’

‘We can deal with fathers,’ said Abel. ‘If it’s murder—that’s the Law.’

‘There was someone else involved. They’d be bound to investigate—’

‘Where else would they do their investigating?’ said Abel simply. ‘When they’ve got us.’

Primmy came back. The front of her long cotton dress had dribbles of wetness down it and she held in her hand a sodden paper. She said: ‘She did kill herself.’

She had printed in straggling capitals, in a rough estimate of Megan’s probable spelling: *I am to unhapy. I will droun myself.* ‘I’ve made it all wet, as though she dropped it in the water or something; no one could say it was her writing or anyone’s writing. I haven’t said anything about being wicked or pregnant or anything. It needn’t have been that; and we don’t want to put the idea into people’s heads.’

‘Primmy—if she was murdered!’

‘Anything’s better,’ said Primula, ‘than Christo being put in prison.’

And the words had been spoken at last: they faced it at last. Christo raised his head. ‘In prison? Dear God, if they put me in prison—!’ A sort of darkness closed in upon him at the bare thought of it. The closeness and the suffocation. ‘I couldn’t. I couldn’t.’

‘I’ll take it there,’ said Primmy; and before they could stop her had darted away across the little paved yard and was gone.

Abel and Rohan started after her but the girls held them back, clinging to their arms. ‘If she’s seen, no one will blame *her* for anything. Besides she knows the way.’

‘Besides,’ said Evaine, ‘she loves him. She wants to be the one to go.’

It was five o’clock. The sun was high and bright so that the shadows made dark troughs between the tall bean rows and the air was hot with the scents and smells of a farming countryside. Melisande went into the cottage and made a great can of coffee, carrying it out to them carefully on the wooden tray with two rather wobbling stacks of pottery mugs. They crouched on the dry ground about the bench and when the children toddled up to claim love and petting from them, gently sent them back to play. There was perhaps no love to spare from their passionate protection of one who so deeply, deeply needed it.

On the mountain behind them, two small boys hung about aimlessly, kicking out with stout scuffed shoes at the curled fronds of the bracken. ‘Say we’ve been here the whole time, Llew. If anyone asks you, say we was up here on the mountain. Never went near the woods above Cwm-esgair, never went near the kites....’ A dozen pairs of kites or less, in the British isles, and their nests guarded jealously, with penalties for disturbing, let alone robbing them. But a man in Llangwyn was offering two pounds for an egg. ‘Playing cops and robbers up here on the mountain,’ assented Llewellyn, comfortably. Given a little to the histrionics, Llew; you could always rely on him to embroider things...

And Nancy and Blodwen, creeping back down the side of the mountain, along the sheep track, the short cut to Llangwyn. Been to the cinema—there’s sinful! A dirty old picture—Blod’s big brother Idris had

told her about it, warned her not to tell Mam. But once there, they hadn't dared to go in to the picture house after all. Blod had seen Mam and Da talking to a man—it was mart day—and suppose they'd glanced up and seen her, and Nancy in that bright red dress! 'Well, all right, say there's lots of red dresses like that,' said Blodwen impatiently. 'We was never in Llangwyn, we was sitting over there in the fields below Cwm-esgair, reading our books.' They had at least contrived some somewhat highly coloured magazines. 'Come on now, get to the fields!' Nancy was silly, really; and fancy coming to the Llangwyn at all in such a bright dress! 'One day, Nancy James, I won't be best friends with you any more.'

Primmy had returned from her errand. Her lovely face was very grey and strained but she was triumphant. 'I had a better idea, I put the note on a bush near the entrance to the cave. Anyone passing down the path would see it. Otherwise, if no one went into the cave—and they mightn't for ages —'

'Did you—see her, Primmy?'

'Well, I... I just went into the middle of the cave, where you can begin to see the river. She's still there. I could—I could see her legs.' Plump, sun-burned legs, like a child's legs, toes turned down and digging into the grass. She confessed: 'I couldn't bear any more.'

'There was no point,' said Melisande in her own kind, comforting way. 'You couldn't do her any good, if she was dead.'

Christo struggled to his feet again. 'If no one goes to the cave—she'll be lying there. She might lie there all night. We can't leave her, we couldn't.'

'Christo, love, she's dead.'

If Christo found a dead creature in the woods, he made a grave and buried it: not with little crosses and sentimentalities—he just said it wasn't

decent, it was too pitiful. Even to animals, he showed respect. And now...‘Just lying there—with her head hanging down into the water...’ He said miserably: ‘It was bad enough to run away and leave her: even for a little while. If it hadn’t been for the cave—but it seemed to be pressing down, lowering down, just there behind me. We can’t leave her there all night.’

‘If someone sees the note—’

‘Who’ll be using that path?’ said Melisande, reluctantly.

‘It gets more and more awful,’ said Christo, ‘to think I just left her there.’ He took a huge and frightening resolve. ‘I must go and tell the police.’

They were terrified. ‘Wait, Christo, wait! There must be another way out.’

‘If it was children that found her!’ said Evaine; there were two small children always playing about at Penbryn, across the valley.

‘We could pretend we were all going along the path,’ said Primmy, ‘and saw the note and went into the cave and found her.’

‘Who’ll believe us?’ insisted Abel.

Christo was coming out of his state of shock, out of the claustrophobic horrors that had driven him from the cave. ‘I can’t leave her there and that’s the end of it. All night and perhaps the next and the next... I’ll go to the police. I’ll simply say that she’d asked me to meet her and I found her there.’

‘At least, at least, say that you saw the note?’

‘Well, all right, I’ll say that I saw the note. Actually, I thought I heard someone moving and as she wasn’t in the glade, I went through to the river.’

‘Christo! It could have been the murderer!’

‘Well, then I’ll tell them—No, I can’t if I’m going to say the note was there.’ He looked shocked and horrified, nevertheless.

‘We’ll all go down now,’ said Abel. ‘We’ll—we’ll get her out of the water. We’ll go to the police and tell them about it, say that you rushed back and told us. Only you’ve got to swear that you’ll say you saw the note.’

Evaine stayed with the babies. The rest went down to the woods, hurrying, lest anyone should observe them, as though on an anxious errand. Through the fields, skirting the growing crops, over a gate tied as usual intricately with string which a farmer must each day patiently unknot: why not a simple noose or even a metal catch they never could understand—but that was farming in dear Welsh Wales. Into the cool of the woods and so, crossing the path, to the green glade, the late sunshine thrusting its bright slanting rays down through the branches, like the golden rays from old pictures of God the Father in heaven.

No one had passed that way. The dampened paper still hung, pierced through by a thorn, blue-grey against the whiteness of the starry blossom. Christo picked a sprig of it, wrenching it off from the tough parent bough, and carried it with him, creeping after them, tense again with the suffocating horror of the dark cave, close about him. ‘Is she still there?’

She was still there: still in both senses, a lump, a thing, lying on the low bank, two humped shoulders where the head disappeared hanging down into the water; one arm trailing, the other bent behind her. Christo, half fainting, turned aside as they lifted her out and laid her on the bank. Her face was terrible, turned up to the afternoon sunshine, lank hair spread across it like dark weed. He knelt down beside her and looked with juddering self-control into the blank blue eyes; and placed in the drowned hand his little sprig of May. ‘Someone must stay with her,’ he said. ‘We can’t leave her alone again.’

‘I’ll stay,’ said Rohan at once. ‘Mellie and I will stay. You three go down to the village and tell the police.’

They toiled along the narrow path to the tiny police station; saw, unastonished, the freezing of the constable’s face as they filed wretchedly in. They had done no harm, never been brought to his attention, but—the Hippies! Christo said steadily: ‘We came to tell you that we’ve found a girl dead, down by the river. She’s been drowned.’

‘It’s Megan the Post,’ said Melisande, in the Welsh idiom.

‘Megan Thomas? Drowned? Duw, duw!’ said the man. He looked at them for a moment suspiciously but accepted the obvious way out. ‘Drowned herself, is it? Lost her health, poor thing, everyone knew it. Not too surprising after all.’

‘She left a note,’ said Abel. He handed it over. ‘It seems to have got wet.’

The constable peered down at it: looked up sharply, suspicious again. ‘Funny she wouldn’t write it in Welsh?’

Primmy went ashen. Stupid, stupid mistake—of course a girl like that would write in her familiar tongue! But Abel said coolly: ‘We think it was meant for—him—so that’s why it would be in English.’ He told the little story, quietly, reassuringly. The man accepted it readily enough. To his somewhat simple mind, the likelihood of a mad girl’s drowning herself seemed pretty logical. ‘Duw, duw! Well, well—poor girl!’ And when they brought him to the Corot-green evening gloom of the bank by the water, he knelt over her and, seeing how they had laid her out, reverently, with the sprig of blossom in her hand, said again: ‘Poor girl—there’s pitiful!’

But he wore a very different look when next afternoon he came with the sergeant from Llangwyn, to the cottage. He had known the dead girl from her childhood and now was black with anger. He summoned them all into

the single big room which they had constructed from all the little downstairs parlours and larders and kitchen, now thrown into one; and said to the three men, viciously, not waiting for his superior: ‘Well—which one of you, then?’

‘She was pregnant,’ said the sergeant. ‘And murdered. Held down by her shoulders with her head in the stream. You heard what the constable said. Which one of you?’

‘We found her there, dead.’

‘*He* found her,’ said the constable, hand fisted, lifted as though he could hardly restrain himself from hitting Christo in the face. ‘Or so he says. But she wasn’t dead, was she—not yet?’

They stood with the big, scrubbed wooden table between them—six, bunched close together, quivering with fear; and The Law. ‘She told me she was in great trouble,’ said Christo, ‘and asked me to come there.’

‘And you’re the one who got her into great trouble.’

‘No, I never touched her.’ He did not know that he straightened up his thin shoulders and spoke out boldly a truth about himself. ‘I wouldn’t harm anyone so helpless and innocent.’

‘So someone else got her pregnant,’ said the sergeant, ‘but it’s you she turns to.’ Tell me another one, his voice insinuated.

‘She thought he was terribly good,’ said Rohan. ‘She thought he was a sort of saint.’

‘She thought he was Jesus Christ,’ said Primmy.

‘For Christ’s sake—Jesus Christ!’

‘Because of his face and his beard,’ said Melisande. ‘And because of himself. It’s true; he would never hurt anything or anyone. She could understand that, she could recognise it. So she turned to him.’

‘And he turned *her*—over on her face with her head in the water.’

‘You’ve got the note,’ said Rohan.

‘A bit of old printing, all wet. How do we know he didn’t write it himself?’

The girl had been dead some hours, the doctor had said, by the time he saw her. She had left her home at about half past two. If this young man’s story were true, she might well have waited down by the cave for quite a long time before he came along; and after all, these were not the only young men in the valley. They had eliminated most of them, but... Facts stirred uncomfortably in the constable’s mind. Idris Jones, Dai Jones Penbryn’s boy—his name stank not at all sweetly in the nostrils of the local farmers. A man from Llangwyn had gone the rounds last night with brief, routine questions: Idris had said simply that he’d been in the yard all the afternoon, never saw nothing, never moved from the farm. Nothing to confirm that. On the other hand... A bit awkward it was for Constable Evans: Dai Penbryn was a good friend of his and a deacon of the chapel. A better way, he thought, than starting a lot of special enquiries, might be to bring Idris into it as though as an outsider and just keep an eye on his reactions. He suggested: ‘The children from Penbryn—they’re always all over the place, up the mountain, down by the river. They could have seen something: people coming and going.’ He suggested to the sergeant, all innocence: ‘Why not take this lot over there and ask them?’

‘Good idea,’ said the sergeant; not innocent at all of the tortuous methods of conducting police enquiries in isolated communities.

So they all went over to Penbryn and stood in the farmyard like children at a game in the school playground, divided into two vague clumps, confronting one another. Beneath their feet, the cobbles were clean and swept by Idris’s labours yesterday; running down to the stony garden of rough grass, patched with bare earth, ridged where the children’s feet had

kicked or drifted along the ground, starting or stopping the swing. Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Jones glancing dark and uneasy at the sullen face of his son, Idris, Mrs. Jones darting looks of angry unreason at the Hippies with their beards and long hair, the girls carrying each a small child, in the Welsh fashion, almost weightless, in the folds of a shawl, formed into a sort of sling at the left shoulder, brought round under the right arm and tucked in at the waist. Idris shuffled a little, head bent, scuffing back grit with his feet, like a hen sorting grain; Ianto and his friend Llewellyn stood side by side, serge coat-sleeves touching, twitching hands signalling danger; Blodwen faced uncertainty thankful that chicken-hearted Nancy was not here to give secrets away; Gwennie and the inevitable Boyo Thomas the Post, gazing up with large, scared eyes. The heat hung like a haze, heavy with the scent of the hay, the sour tang of the empty silo pit. The sergeant laid the situation before them briefly. ‘All we want to know is—did any of your family see anything—anything at all, never mind what—yesterday afternoon?’

Everyone waited for everyone else to speak. He prompted: ‘You young ones, for example?’

‘We was playing on the swing,’ said Gwennie with the easy untruth of small-childhood.

‘What, the whole afternoon?’

‘True it is, sergeant, they’ll play on that swing all day.’

‘All right, Mrs. Jones, I understand that. But you might have gone down to the trees a bit, Gwennie, when it got too hot? Nothing wrong with that?’ he suggested, an eye turned to the mother. She shrugged and shook her head. Nothing to tell fibs about in that.

But, ‘No, sir, never, sir,’ insisted Gwennie, small fat hands now beginning to tremble. (If they’d known she’d been down to the cave to show Boyo her chest!)

‘Not by the river? There’s cool on a hot day, the river! Down by that old cave, perhaps?’ suggested the constable, temptingly.

Mad Megan, Boyo’s sister Megan, lying on her front out beyond the cave by the river’s edge. Drinking they’d thought she was but now it seemed that she’d been dead, been drowned. And the Hippy had come, running and calling, and gone at last into the cave where she was lying, and they’d scampered away. ‘No, sir, we was on the swing,’ insisted Gwennie, growing a little tearful.

Idris spoke for the first time; idly, casually but looking up shiftily from under his eyebrows. ‘That’s right. I was working in the yard. They was playing on the swing.’

‘All afternoon?’ said the sergeant, sharply: this was an alibi that might too conveniently break both ways.

‘From dinner time,’ said Idris, hardly able now to keep the insolent challenge from his voice.

The little ones had turned upon him large round eyes of astonished gratitude. Had Idris guessed? Was he protecting them? Idris himself was ‘dirty’—dirty old pictures he kept hidden in the barn, Blod had told Ianto so, and Gwennie had heard. He wouldn’t give them away. And this must be it—for after all, they *hadn’t* been in the yard. First they’d been quite a long time up on the mountain; and then by the river.

The sergeant turned slowly. Beside him, the constable said: ‘Idris—Mr. Jones’ eldest son.’

‘You had nothing to do with this business, Idris?’

‘Me? I told you, I told the man last night. I was here, working in the yard.’

‘You have a bit of a name round here, I believe?’

The constable looked wretchedly, anywhere but at Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Got to do your duty, there you are!—but these were his friends. The sergeant observed his expression and interpreted it. ‘Everyone knows it,’ he said.

‘I never touched the girl,’ said Idris. ‘Not in the way of—of killing her, or any other way.’ He added in a voice of contemptuous dismissal: ‘She was mental.’

‘That would make her easy,’ said the sergeant. ‘Easy to kill—and easy “any other way”.’

‘I was in the yard,’ repeated Idris, sullenly. ‘From dinner time on.’

Here was some capital to be made for Ianto and Llewellyn. If Idris said that he and the little ones had been in the yard at Penbryn all the time—then it would be safe to have seen them there; and if they had not been in the woods after kites’ eggs. Ianto gave the touching hand a warning twitch. ‘We could see them in the yard, sergeant. We was up on the mountain across the valley.’

‘Could you see the Hippies’ place?’

‘Not from there, sergeant. Only Penbryn. We could see Penbryn all the time, sir,’ said Llewellyn, officiously, ‘and the little ones swinging.’

‘And Idris?’

‘Yes, sir, Idris doing the silage and then the hay and then clearing up the yard....’

‘Nancy and me could see them too, sergeant,’ said Blodwen. ‘In the fields we was, reading our books, but we could see Penbryn, and Gwennie and Boyo Thomas on the swing.’

‘And Idris?’

‘Yes, sir, Idris starting with the silage.’ When Idris had started on the silage, Blodwen and Nancy had been in Llangwyn. ‘But we never saw no

Hippies, sir: only over to Penbryn.'

'All right,' said the sergeant. He had been keeping Idris Jones in reserve but here were three separate alibis which seemed to have no reason behind them but simple fact. 'All the other boys round here have been eliminated,' he said to Christo—and surely the man must be guilty, just standing there, dumbly. The sergeant averted his gaze from the horrible shaking of the thin hands. 'Now this one, too. So what about it, then?'

Christo stood utterly immobile but for the terrible trembling; paralyzed with a black, an animal fear. If they should arrest him! Shut him up in a cell! I should go mad, he thought: and knew that, literally, it was true. I should go mad. Shut up there, closed in, helpless, in the dark, alone... He would go mad and he knew that he must pray for nothing less: that madness would be best for him then.

They watched him, terrified: watched Idris, watched the shifty lout with his cocky face, safe in the circle of his convenient alibis, a pack of kids under his thumb. 'You!' said Abel, breaking out at him, violently. 'Everyone knows the sort you are! You got her into trouble; and—knowing she was meeting him, perhaps—you got to the cave first and murdered her.'

The sergeant stood with a light hand on Christo's wrist. He said coolly: 'So why did she leave a suicide note?'

'A note?' said Idris, in a curious voice. 'She left a note?'

The note!—which they themselves had written and placed there. 'Perhaps... Perhaps,' suggested Abel, 'she intended to kill herself so she wrote the note. But she couldn't do it and he found her there and held her head down in the water.'

'The same could go for him,' said Idris with a jerk of the chin towards Christo; and now he spoke confidently, subtly jeering.

‘Or the murderer wrote the note himself?’ suggested the sergeant, smoothly. That reaction of Idris’ hadn’t escaped his notice.

‘He’d have had to,’ said Idris, triumphantly. ‘She couldn’t write.’

Couldn’t write? She couldn’t *write*? Rohan hung on to his swinging senses. ‘All the more reason to say that you did it. You killed her, you wrote the note—’ But his voice trailed away in despair.

‘What, me? Knowing that everyone would know she couldn’t write?’ said Idris; and the sergeant unconsciously tightened his grip on Christo’s arm. Throughout all the valley, the Hippies must have been the only people unaware that Mad Megan couldn’t read or write.

So... The girl, pretty and alluring enough, ignorant and foolish....Conceives a passion for one of these free-living young men and conceives indeed. Terrified of her father’s vengeance if she gives away her lover’s name, he takes her down to the cave and there pushes her head under water; fastens up the false note and—with or without the collusion of his friends—arranges to ‘find’ her and duly informs the police. ‘We’ll go along to the station,’ said the sergeant to the constable over Christo’s bent head; and added civilly: ‘You’ll come with us?’

‘He’ll come,’ said the constable, not civilly at all.

Christo made no answer: went with them, dumb.

And dumbly, helplessly, they watched him. The big farm gate swung-to, its post dragging through the dry earth, kicking up a little cloud of dust. Outside, the small, dark police car waited. That alone would be torment, the closed windows and doors.

Along the way, the hedges were milky white; but Corinna would go no more a-Maying down the country lanes. He sat in the rear seat, the sergeant’s hand now light again, on his wrist. He said: ‘Will you have to lock me up?’

‘And do it with pleasure,’ said the constable, not waiting for his sergeant to reply.

‘Now? When we get there? And all through the night?’ He struggled to explain. ‘I get claustrophobia. I can’t bear to be closed in.’

‘You didn’t mind being closed in, in that cave, did you?’ said the constable, only half his attention on the dangerous windings of the narrow country road. ‘You didn’t mind being in there, holding her down, drowning her? You were closed in there; and you’ll be closed in now. Now and for the rest of your life. And God damn you!’

‘Now, now,’ said the sergeant. ‘That’ll be enough!’

‘You didn’t know the girl,’ said the constable, savagely. ‘I knew her from a child. Helpless, she was...’

‘Well, well—he isn’t convicted yet....’

Christo did not hear them: already was beyond hearing. Now, tonight, for the rest of his life. But the rest of his life need not matter. He would know little about it by the end of this one coming night, this endless night.

Endless night... Endless night... ‘What’s that you’re mumbling now?’ said the constable, forgetting the road altogether, to turn and look back over his shoulder. ‘What’s that about drowning?’

From Herrick. From ‘Corinna’. He mumbled it a little louder. ‘All love, all liking, all delight, Lies drowned with us in endless night.’

And he repeated it, ‘Endless night!’ and put his white face into his hands and abandoned himself to the engulfing dark: to his only defence against it—to witlessness.

Gwennie and Boyo had dashed across the field to catch the last possible glimpse of the car. It was their Hippy, the one they’d seen calling to Megan when she was already dead, lying there by the river, dead and drowned.

Duw, duw—what an escape! If anyone had guessed that they'd gone down to the cave so that Gwennie could show Boyo her chest!

PART THREE

Something to Clear the Palate

The Niece from Scotland

‘WELL, FANCY MEETING YOU again!’ cried the pleasant stranger, all flattering astonishment. (‘And about time too, old girl!’ he thought to himself. Kept him hanging about a solid two hours for this chance encounter.)

Gladys had first met him last week here in the Green Man at the top of the cul-de-sac. She’d been sipping a dry sherry before going home to cope with her ladyship and he’d happened to sit down at the same table. Such a nice man! He’d seemed so much interested in her, thought her far too good to be just a housekeeper, wanted to know all about where she worked and for whom. She’d soon found herself pouring out all her little personal troubles; if Gladys had a fault it was perhaps that she was rather too unreticent about the problems of life with Lady Blatchett. And now here he was again, just dropped in for a quick one and insisted upon her joining him. ‘Well, all right, but I *must* be home on the hour. If I’m not, she locks the door and then she hides the key and by the time she’s had a couple of drinks, she can’t find it again and I’m done for.’

‘Surely there must be other ways you could just nip in? You’ve got the run of the place. You could leave something unlocked...’

‘Unlocked! She goes over every door and window even when I’m there; you never know when she’ll go round, checking. If I wasn’t there...! I tell you,’ said Gladys, ‘the house is like a beleaguered castle.’ Guilelessly she described its inner fortifications. ‘She lives in terror, poor old thing, especially after dark.’

It was all on account, it seemed, of Lady Blatchett’s Past. She’d done something shady, fiddled a Trust or something; and so all the family money had come to her and now she went in fear of vengeance at the hands of

cheated relatives. ‘Especially one of them. “My niece from Scotland”, she calls her. It must have been she who would have had most of the money. She’s built up this niece into some sort of terrible ogre; I really think she believes she’ll be murdered in her bed.’ She supposed, said Gladys, that that was what had turned her to the drinking.

‘A proper old lush she sounds to me. I wonder you stay with her,’ said the sympathetic stranger.

A new look came into Gladys’s sad, middle-aged eyes. ‘I get very good wages. And I’ve got my poor brother, you see. I’m not having him put in any public institution. With his background—living with a lot of patients beneath his proper station...’ She was back on a well-worn hobby-horse. Mr. Smith looked at his watch and warned her that the hour was approaching.

Patsy was waiting for him when he returned from seeing Gladys safely in at the front door of Number 20, down at the bottom of the cul-de-sac. She looked—exhilarated. Her blue eyes were shining, her feather-cap of dusty gold hair seemed to be standing on end with excitement and gaiety. ‘You look somewhat lit,’ he said, climbing into the driving seat of the little car.

‘Oh, Edgar, he’s such a pet! And fallen like a ton of bricks; poor lamb—quite defenceless.’

‘You are speaking of Dr. Fable I take it,’ said Edgar, not quite so pleasant now.

‘At Number 10—slap opposite Lady Blatchett’s. We did agree, dear heart, that I should get to work on him?’

‘Well, you did get to work then? And it went off all right?’

‘Like a bomb. I was the last patient, all as arranged. “Stay and have a glass of sherry, my dear Miss Comfort?” “Hey, hey,” I said, “watch your doctor-patient relationships: they’re slipping!” ’

‘Despite all this wit, however, you stayed for the sherry?’

‘Yes, I stayed. And who else do you think stayed too? The Desiccated Receptionist. Now—wasn’t that a master-stroke? I made her join us; and now I’ve got not one of them eating out of my hand, but two.’ She wriggled down complacently into her seat. ‘So how’s about the housekeeper?’

Edgar retailed his own news. ‘It’s true all right, blast it! The place is like a fortress. Bolts, keys—I heard the very rattle of the chains as the drawbridge went up. And what’s worse, they’ve got it so fixed that once inside you can’t get out again. Self-locking doors and what not. You have to have special keys.’ Though why anyone should want to cage themselves in with thieves and murderers, he couldn’t imagine. ‘I tried advising dear Gladys to leave a few orifices open, but she literally dare not. The old woman lives in terror.’ He dilated upon her reactions to the Niece in Scotland.

‘Oh, well—revenge is sweet, no doubt,’ said Patsy equably. ‘Personally, I’ll be quite contented with Auntie’s pearls.’

‘You’ll have to; anything else she’s got is kept in the bank,’ said Edgar.

Their plan went into operation the following evening. Gladys, patently rattled, answered the front door and beheld the friendly stranger from the Green Man. ‘Do forgive my disturbing you at such an hour—’

‘You shouldn’t be calling here at any hour,’ said Gladys, glancing fearfully back towards the closed drawing-room door.

‘It was only that I mislaid my lighter last night. Sentimental value, you know; I couldn’t bear to lose it. I wondered if by any chance you’d happened to notice—’

‘I noticed nothing,’ said Gladys, beginning to close the door.

‘It’s nowhere in the pub. I suppose...’ He had unconsciously moved a step forward so that she could do nothing without physically pushing him

backwards. 'You couldn't possibly have picked it up, without thinking, and dropped it with your other things into your handbag?' In his anxiety, the gentleman had begun, quite unconsciously again, of course, to raise his voice. Gladys glanced back over her shoulder again. 'No, no, of course: no such thing!'

'If you wouldn't mind just looking? So sorry to trouble you.'

'*Please* keep your voice down; she'll be coming out into the hall.' She dithered doubtfully. 'Well, I'll just go and make sure.' She hurried off towards the kitchen, in her agitation never thinking to ask him to wait on the step outside. And extraordinary to relate, what he had suggested must have happened after all; for here at the bottom of her neat leather handbag was a rather cheap silver lighter. He thanked her effusively and went away. She listened for a moment at the drawing-room door, but except for the clinking of glass against bottle, all was peace. Her room was on the second floor; her ladyship never came up so far, couldn't manage the stairs, these days, and one way and another she'd got it very comfortable and cosy. With an occasional glance down from the top landing to see that all was well, she spent the rest of the evening with her knitting and the television.

Patsy slipped out of the dining-room, once Gladys had gone and went quietly up to the first floor. She located her ladyship's bedroom—really, the amount Edgar had got out of that housekeeper!—and inspected the others. There were two unused rooms, their keys in the doors. She chose the more remote, went in, locked the door behind her and put herself very comfortably to bed. There'd be the whole night to wait; and who looks into a locked spare room?

At midnight Lady Blatchett, propelled by the patient Gladys, reeled uncertainly up to bed. She would remain there—so Gladys had confided to her sympathetic friend in the pub, ('She never thinks that *I've* got to get up,

after waiting up for her till all hours!')—till lunch-time. Patsy did not hear them. She was snuggled up under the spare-room eiderdown, deep in untroubled slumbers.

At eleven the next morning Gladys, according to custom, inched open the bedroom door and peeked in, before retiring to the kitchen for coffee and a biscuit. Lady Blatchett was still fast asleep and snoring. The pearls were kept under her pillow but in her late evening condition, her ladyship hadn't been too clever about concealing them: Gladys could see their gentle gleam, tumbled half out from under the crumpled linen. A choker of pearls, not many of them and not very large—but perfectly matched, they said, of a wonderful quality and worth a small fortune. At that moment she heard the milkman's knock and went down to the back door. Patsy had checked on this being settling-up day. Gladys would be kept occupied for several minutes.

She came back into the house to hear muffled squeals and the sound of her ladyship's bell, violently ringing. Lady Blatchett had been shocked awake to find her head and shoulders enveloped in a tangle of black draperies; and by the time she got free to summon help, the front door had closed and the pearls were gone.

Gladys spent what time she must in calming her ladyship's agitations, which centred largely upon the threat of the Niece from Scotland; and then telephoned the police.

The station was at the corner of the cul-de-sac, just opposite the Green Man; and a constable on duty outside was able to report that though many people had gone in and out of the cul-de-sac in the course of the morning, in the few minutes since the theft of the pearls, not a soul had left it. Unless egress had been effected through one of the other houses, therefore—which on a rapid mental reconnaissance seemed unlikely—it was safe to assume

that both plunder and plunderer were still safely bottled up inside. A police officer made good time to the scene of the crime.

Patsy, meanwhile, had trotted calmly out of the front door of Number 20 (now, being daylight, with its defences down) and across to the front door of Number 10.

The Desiccated Receptionist was all of a flutter. ‘Oh, Miss Comfort!—you’re early.’

‘Am I?’ said Patsy. ‘That’s not like *me*. I’m usually late.’

‘Well, you aren’t due today until half past eleven.’

‘Oh, aren’t I?’ said Patsy. ‘Well, never mind. I’ll just have to sit in your lovely waiting-room—and wait.’

She was at leisure, therefore, to observe the antics of the patient who emerged from Dr. Fable’s consulting room, five minutes later; and could describe them in full when the police subsequently made their enquiries.

In the interim, however, she had been in to see Dr. Fable and assure that infatuate practitioner that her headaches were, alas! no better. He showed no marked distress at this information and agreed that she’d have to come back several times—several times—for more treatment. Meanwhile: ‘Have you got another box of the pills for me, like you promised? Oh, you *are* a sweetie!—lovely sample ones again so I shan’t have to pay for these either?’ He handed them over in their round, white cardboard box, faintly rattling, plastic covered and sealed. ‘It’ll have to be a prescription after this, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘That’s the last of the lot they sent me. Let me know next time how much good they’ve done you.’

‘I’ll make it an evening appointment and scrounge another drink off you,’ said Patsy, cheerfully withdrawing. ‘With you and your nice Miss Hodge,’ she added, just loud enough for nice Miss Hodge to hear.

What with putting down her gloves on Miss Hodge's desk while she ruffled through her handbag for her diary, and rifling through the diary, once found, for a suitable date for the evening appointment—it was not surprising that when at last she departed in a near hysteria of jokes and farewells and thank-yous, Miss Comfort should have forgotten to take her box of pills with her. She was making such good time up the cul-de-sac that Miss Hodge could not catch up with her. She put the box on her shelf where it merged in very nicely with the clutter of professional samples common to any doctor's surgery; and forgot all about them.

The police intercepted Patsy at the mouth of the cul-de-sac. She was highly entertained to learn of the theft of pearls from the house opposite the doctor's: just like the telly, she said—weren't they all thrilled, right here under the nose of their own dear little police station, in their own dear little cul-de-sac? Was she a suspect? Were they going to search her? She simply longed to be searched, only promise not to tickle! The police compromised by inviting her into their own dear little station where a somewhat butch young policewoman obliged as to the searching. Neither Miss Comfort's charming person nor her handbag offered up anything of interest; except that, mixed up with the exotic clobber in the latter, there appeared a round white box of pills. The police broke the seals and glanced at the pills, even breaking one or two of them across: but they were just pills. Since they showed so little eagerness, Patsy apparently thought it not worth while to mention that while one pill box now appeared in her handbag, another had been left behind on Miss Hodge's desk. Instead she trailed a pretty little red herring. 'I suppose the thief must have been the funny little man with the medicine?'

What funny little man with what medicine?

‘Well, he came out of Dr. Fable’s room while I was waiting, but instead of leaving he sat down while Miss Hodge was busy with the next patient (a very preggers lady: a quickie, no sherry for *her*!) and pulled a bottle of pink medicine out of his pocket and started taking it. I mean poured it down his throat straight out of the bottle.’

Police interest perked up. The little man was still elsewhere in the station, having just emerged—unscathed—from a fairly thorough searching.

‘Yes, and then he jumped up and went over to one of the pictures and began looking at it, terribly intently—I mean sort of looking at the frame and feeling behind it in a funny sort of way. A frightful picture; personally I think Dr. Fable’s got it upside down, poor love! Perhaps the little man thought so too? Anyway, he took some more medicine and went away.’

The officers went away too, legging it down the cul-de-sac as fast as they could go. The picture was there all right and, upside-down or not, simply covered with glove-prints, the gloves having been liberally dribbled over with the pink medicine. Apart from these, however, it proved unrewarding.

There seemed little doubt about the genuineness of Lady Blatchett’s loss. The police went about the busy elimination of suspects. Gladys the housekeeper had an unsullied ten years’ record and a further twelve years to her credit of faithful if not devoted service to her ladyship. Dr. Fable appeared to be a blameless practitioner and, successful, debonair and extremely well-to-do, hardly susceptible to suspicion of elaborate and well planned theft. Desiccated Miss Hodge had been twenty years in the service of this doctor or that, without a blot on her escutcheon. Enquiries in neighbouring houses were in progress, of course; but meanwhile all that remained was the little clutch of patients. And one was Miss Comfort—limpidly innocent—one, the ultra respectable mother-to-be from an address

in Kensington; and the third the funny little man with the bottle of pink medicine. The police may be forgiven for concentrating with some intensity upon the little man; and since he had not gone at all into Miss Hodge's office, for leaving this sanctum to the last in their investigations of Dr. Fable's premises.

Miss Comfort slid up close to Miss Hodge as they sat awaiting dismissal from the police station. 'I say, Miss Hodge, it's a little bit awkward. I left my pills in your room.'

'Yes, I found them,' said Miss Hodge. 'I put the box on my shelf.'

'The thing is... It's because of Dr. Fable,' said Patsy, raising troubled blue eyes to Miss Hodge's sharp grey elderly ones. 'I mean, they're—well, you know, sort of pep pills. I don't think he really ought to have given them to me only I—I pleaded with him. I'm trying to fight it; I told him the tale a bit, he doesn't know I'm not supposed to be on them.' She insisted: 'It would be so awful if through helping me he got any—well, any kind of horrid publicity. You know how ugly it can be and the press will be swarming around here soon.'

'What can *I* do about it?' said Miss Hodge.

'If you just wouldn't mention my having left them? Could you perhaps sort of whisk them out of sight before they start looking round your office? It's for his sake. I do like him so much. And I think you do too?' said Patsy, half tender, half teasing.

'I'll see that it's all right,' said Miss Hodge gruffly.

'And not say a word to him? I swore to him I wouldn't tell a soul, not even you.'

'I'll keep it to myself,' said Miss Hodge.

A further examination, increasingly penetrating, produced nothing in the little man that might have been 'taken internally' along with the pink

medicine. His finger-prints on the other hand were highly revealing. For Mr. Smith, the agreeable stranger of the Green Man, proved to be none other than Edgar Snaith, jewel thief, with a long and unbeautiful history behind him. He appeared to have arrived but recently in London, though a familiar face—and set of finger-prints—further up north. Usually worked with accomplices, varying them frequently. Certainly was not known ever to have associated with Dr. Fable, Miss Hodge, the pregnant lady—or Miss Comfort. Did prove, however, to have scraped acquaintance with the now deeply penitent Gladys (currently undernotice of dismissal) and had certainly elicited from her a great deal of information about Lady Blatchett's ménage and regime. Witnesses attested to his having been seen at her front door on the previous evening; but agreed with Gladys's indignant avowal that he had been (almost) immediately sent away; and both Gladys and Lady Blatchett herself could testify to the pearls having been in her ladyship's possession long after he had gone. He had turned up at Dr. Fable's two mornings earlier, declaring himself the victim of mysterious pains, his regular practitioner having been left behind when he came south. Had been a little insistent upon a second appointment being fixed for eleven o'clock this morning.

By this time it was not remarkable if the gregarious Miss Comfort, still caged up—though with all courtesy—at the police station, had fallen into chat with her fellow sufferers. The little man, however, proved resistant to her blandishments. 'A fine mess of things you've made for *me*, Miss! The pain come on frightful and I took a swig of me stuff to ease it. What else do I carry it round for? And as for the picture—it's my belief he's got it upside-down, I was trying to see how it'd look if I righted it.' Miss Comfort sh'sh'd him, to the great disappointment of everyone else present, and his voice died away to a reproachful grumble. Miss Comfort could be seen to be

defending her actions. In fact she was saying, 'It all went fine, Edgar. The Desiccated's got them. You've drawn off the hunt most beautifully.'

'When can you get hold of them?'

'As soon as the police stop harassing *you*. And they soon must; there's nothing to hold you on. Get in touch like we arranged and we can get on with it.'

'No tricks meanwhile,' said Edgar warningly.

'Of course not,' said Patsy warmly. And she meant it. He deserved his share thoroughly.

When some days later she judged that the time was ripe, she went back to Dr. Fable's. Miss Hodge was in the act of shrugging on her outdoor coat. 'The doctor's left, I'm afraid.'

Patsy knew that. She had not come to see Dr. Fable.

Miss Hodge took off her coat again and led the way back into her office. 'You've come for the pills?'

'I've tried to hold out. But the craving—it's terrible,' said Patsy, going into her act. 'I just simply must have them.'

'No doubt,' said Miss Hodge. She had turned and now half sat on the edge of her desk and she was looking very straight at Patsy. 'You see, Miss Comfort—I know what the pills are.'

Patsy played for time. 'Well, I explained to you—'

'I mean I know that they're not pills,' said Miss Hodge.

'Oh,' said Patsy. It did seem rather final.

'You see,' said Miss Hodge, 'you made one small mistake. Yes, I am in love with Dr. Fable; to any one of your age, no doubt that's very amusing. But it does mean something: it means that Dr. Fable knows he can trust me—that I'd never ever let him down. He would never in his life have warned you not to tell me.'

So she'd looked in the box. But—having looked there, reflected Patsy, taking heart of grace, had done nothing; hadn't gone at once to the police. Perhaps even the Miss Hodges of this world had their price? 'Have you told this to anyone?' she said.

'No, I haven't,' said Miss Hodge; (perhaps the glass of sherry was paying dividends then?) 'I thought... Well, you have shown yourself very—friendly—towards me, Miss Comfort. And I know Lady Blatchett, she's a patient of ours—and I know she's a horrid old woman. So I thought I'd wait and hear your side of the story.'

'Let's sit down and have a natter, Miss Hodge,' said Patsy.

So they sat down side by side on the long upholstered seat beneath the upside-down picture where by arrangement with Miss Comfort Edgar Snaith had lately made a fool of himself. 'You see,' said Patsy, 'Lady Blatchett is my aunt. And when my uncle died, she fiddled things—nothing illegal that anyone could get hold of: just worked on our doddering old family solicitor till she'd done us out of something like twenty thousand pounds. Well, that was too bad; but now my father's dead and my mother's ill—so beautiful, she is, Miss Hodge, and still quite young—and so dreadfully ill! And twenty thousand pounds—or ten thousand or five, for that matter—might make all the difference to her living a little longer and living that little in comfort. So... Well, one day our little house in Scotland was burgled and I caught the thief—no one more surprised than I was; unless it was him!—and locked him up in a room. And then, instead of sending for the police, I had a little chat with him. I mean, suddenly I saw that if I could bring in a professional, I might get some of my own back—and I do mean that, Miss Hodge,' said Patsy, 'get my *own* back. The pearls would be only a part of the value of what she's robbed us of. So—we went into partnership. His name, no doubt you realise, was Edgar Snaith.' And

she went off into fits of giggles describing the alternative plans she and Edgar had devised, for drawing the fire of the police. ‘*He’s* safe enough. He’s never touched the pearls, they can’t pin anything on him for drinking pink medicine and looking at a picture. Unless, of course,’ she asked, raising her sweet blue eyes, half alarmed, half smiling, ‘you’re going to give us away?’

‘You mean,’ said Miss Hodge, ‘that I’m simply to hand over the pearls to you!’

Patsy half opened her mouth to propose a ‘cut’; but knew better and closed it again. ‘Would you—please?’ she said.

Miss Hodge got up and fetched the round white box with its green lettering. She sat nursing it in her hand. She suggested pleasantly: ‘Fifty-fifty?’

‘Fifty-fifty?’ said Patsy; incredulous.

‘Twenty-five percent each for you and Mr. Snaith. The other half to me.’

Patsy made a wild snatch at the box. It was empty. ‘I was waiting for that,’ said Miss Hodge. She added that Miss Comfort need not worry; the pearls were quite safe—but not where she would find them.

‘Fifty-*fifty*?’ said Patsy.

‘Make up your mind,’ said Miss Hodge.

Patsy’s quick little mind shifted: spotted a discrepancy, ‘Possession is nine points of the law,’ she said. ‘You have possession of the pearls. Why divvy up? Why not scoop the lot?’

‘I am not an habitual criminal,’ said Miss Hodge simply. ‘I wouldn’t know how to dispose of them.’

‘Impasse,’ said Patsy.

‘Impasse,’ agreed Miss Hodge.

And yet, not quite. 'Possession's nine points of the law,' said Patsy again. 'But the law will not allow you to possess Lady Blatchett's pearls. You do possess Lady Blatchett's pearls. Suppose I cut my losses and inform the police?'

'You do just that,' said Miss Hodge, growing alarmingly less desiccated every minute. 'And see where it will get you.'

'It won't get me anywhere: except one up over *you*. And if I can't have my proper share of the pearls, that'll do next best for me. Twenty-five per cent—of what a fence will give for them!—it'll be worth that much to see you doing time. And don't think you won't. You can say what you like to them about me—I haven't got them, I'm in the clear; they don't even know that I know Edgar. But Edgar was at that old woman's last night, and he was here the next morning. You wait till Edgar starts coming clean to the police: how you bribed him to deal with the sale of the pearls—which you'd already stolen on one of the old woman's visits here, replacing them with false ones: perfectly easy while the doctor was examining the patient. You'd have told him to look for them behind the picture frame,' said Patsy warming to her theme, 'and to swallow them down with some medicine and so smuggle them out...' She shrugged. 'Lots of holes; but Edgar will stop all those up, never fear! He's a past master, is Edgar, at conning the police. And there'll still be nothing against him; he won't ever have touched the pearls, he'll tell them you have them, and that'll be true. And against me also—nothing.'

'Except, of course,' said Miss Hodge, 'that the most casual enquiry will reveal you as being the Niece from Scotland: with a grudge against Lady Blatchett and a well-founded conviction that what she possesses is rightfully yours.'

‘Oh, that!’ said Patsy. ‘No dice there, I’m afraid, love! You didn’t really fall for that, did you?’

‘Well, no,’ said Miss Hodge. ‘You cooked it all up on the spur of the moment from what poor Gladys had confided to your friend, Mr. Snaith. You thought such a story must surely win over my sentimental spinster heart, and I’d turn over the pearls to you.’

‘But you didn’t believe it?’

‘Lady Blatchett is an old woman,’ said Miss Hodge. ‘So odd for her to have a niece of your generation; especially as your poor dying mother is still so young—you are not the child of elderly parents.’ She smiled at Miss Comfort with the smile of a crocodile. ‘So much more likely, don’t you think, that the Niece from Scotland is by now at least a middle-aged woman.’

Miss Comfort saw the light immediately. ‘Like you?’ she said.

‘That’s right, my dear,’ said Miss Hodge. ‘Like me.’

The Niece from Scotland: obliged to earn her own living, wangling herself at last with her excellent references into a post where she might observe the old aunt at close quarters: might even ingratiate herself into her favour. The older one becomes, the more frequent one’s visits to the doctor—chosen because he dwelt so handily just across the way—and the more necessary the attentions of the doctor’s kindly receptionist. Miss Comfort bowed to necessity. ‘*You* are the Niece from Scotland?’

‘And you a professional thief,’ said Miss Hodge, ‘and that’s all about it.’ She rose, dusted down her charmless dress. ‘So I think fifty-fifty is a very fair division. Where do we begin?’ she said.

At Number 20, Lady Blatchett rang the bell for Gladys. She continued a serial lecture upon the sins and follies of careless talk in public. ‘But I have decided after all to retain you in my service.’

Gladys was not entirely astonished; not for nothing had she made herself indispensable over all these years. She said however, with due deference: 'Thank you, my lady.'

'I have had a nice cheque from the insurance people so I feel rather better.'

'Oh, I am glad,' said Gladys, much relieved. 'Now your ladyship can have some pearls again.' She said humbly, for in some mysterious way the theft was acknowledged to have been all her fault, 'Always seeing you with them—I've missed them, my lady.'

'I hadn't intended...' But Lady Blatchett looked into the mirror. 'Perhaps I do need something.'

Bare, ancient, crêpey throat, where the dewlap hung unlovely and the 'bracelets' deepened with each succeeding year. 'I was even thinking that your ladyship might have got a double row, this time. You'll never match the last, I know; but perhaps two rows of something not quite so good—?'

Her ladyship thought on reflection that that might be a good idea. After all, a nice bit of jewellery was better for her, really, than all that money lying in the bank.

Better for Gladys too. What a blessing the burglary had been! Not that she hadn't been, for simply ages, working towards something of the sort—all that carefully indiscreet talk in pubs! She'd been beginning to be a bit desperate by the time Mr. Smith turned up; the money from the first pearls wouldn't last for ever—and if she died for it, her poor brother wasn't going to be moved to some public institution where he wouldn't have his proper privacy: a man of his background mixing with just ordinary patients...!

Behind the shop front of a respectable jeweller's, Miss Hodge, Miss Comfort and Mr. Snaith stood aghast at an offer of twenty-five pounds for

some nice cultured pearls; and up in her comfortable room, Lady Blatchett's well-paid housekeeper was writing off to an address in Scotland...

PART FOUR

Petits Fours

Hic Jacet...

‘GOOD HEAVENS,’ SAID MRS. Fletcher-Store, ‘what a revolting jacket! Where on earth did you get it?’

‘I bought it off a man in the pub,’ said Mr. Fletcher-Store.

‘A man—what man?’

‘I don’t know—just a man.’

‘You really should be more careful what you buy off strangers in pubs,’ said Mrs. Fletcher-Store. ‘It’s awful. Looks like a dead sheep, turned inside out.’

‘Good lord!—just what he said *his* wife said.’ He looked down at the jacket doubtfully, flattening his chin against his chest. It was a brightish tan, true, but heavily fleece-lined and he’d fancied it had a—well—a bit of a Raffish look... And, lost in reverie, he saw himself, flailing his arms to shrug on the jacket as he ran across the tarmac to his waiting kite. ‘I thought it looked rather good,’ he said.

‘You thought it looked like the jolly old R.A.F.,’ said Mrs. Fletcher-Store, pronouncing it ‘raff’. ‘Wizard prang, old boy, and a couple of crates in the drink in my time, what, what: and if you don’t believe me—as well you may not!—a handle-bar moustache to prove it.’ She looked at her husband with something very much like loathing. ‘How I’ve lived all these years with such a miserable phoney...’

‘I *was* in the Raff,’ protested Mr. Fletcher-Store.

‘For six months. On the ground. And never saw a kite fly, except on Hampstead Heath. The ugly truth is, Gerald,’ she said viciously, ‘that you’re a phoney, a rotten, bombasting phoney, trying to cover up from all the world, yourself included and especially, that you’re nothing but a dud and a

failure—never did a decent job in your life, never kept a woman in your life—except me, because I’m sorry for you; never even made a friend, except a few miserable pick-ups in pubs, bought with drinks you couldn’t afford. And now selling you jackets you can’t afford either...’

‘All right, all right,’ said Fletcher-Store. ‘I know.’

‘You know? You don’t know and you don’t want to know.’

‘I don’t suppose any man wants to know that sort of thing about himself. Especially if it’s true,’ he said. ‘And I don’t think it really does any good, quite so constantly reminding him of it.’

‘Then don’t go off spending money at that rotten little pub in Hartling and buying a lot of rubbishy tripe we can’t afford. You seem to forget that what money comes into this house is made by me. You with your shoddy little half-baked short stories—’

‘All right, all right,’ he said again. ‘Skip it. I’ve got the message. No more purchases in pubs.’ And he added, half to himself but loud enough for her to hear it, for it always galled her that in fact he was the better educated of the two: ‘*Hic jacet.*’...

‘Hick jacket?’ she said. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘I was making a pun, dear,’ he said sweetly. ‘In Latin. It means you’ve slain me in the battle of the jacket. *Hic jacet*—here lies...’

But she got the last word as usual, after all. ‘Oh, well,’ she said, ‘you were always good at that.’ He heard her footsteps pounding up the stairs, moving about the bedroom as she changed for her evening swim. After a little while the front door banged.

He waited five minutes to be sure she wouldn’t come back for anything, and then went out to the tool-shed where he kept hidden his bottle of whisky: she hardly ever let him go to the pub, so this was next best. Just the right tot, or one’s brain got fuddled and he had some hard thinking to do

—filled up with a good deal of water to make it last longer. He carried it back to the sitting-room, pulled up a chair to the moonlit window, and sat down to go on thinking out his plan to murder her.

On the whole, Gerald had decided, the odds were in his favour. For a start there need be no hurry: the sooner the better, certainly, but there might yet come to be almost a pleasure in listening to increasingly frequent tirades, when each word added fuel to a funeral pyre already crackling. And then there could be no obvious motive. No ‘other woman’—one reason for coming to this ghastly hole had been, according to Elsa, to get away from the other-woman menace; and certainly here, candidates were nil. And no money interest: they could just about eke out on her scribblings and his own: living cheap on the fruit and vegetables and eggs he was supposed to provide by his work on the small-holding. (Small-holding! A vile old pig and a lot of scrawny hens, and all that manuring and digging—he, who in his day....) And he fell into a reverie again of those old wild, wonderful times of the ditched crates and the pranged kites and the boon companions boasting together over the exploits of others—never of one’s own, by George!—over the tankards in the jolly old hostelries....And after all, given the chance, might not he too have been of that splendid company? A man was not born to failure: surely it must be fair to say that it was bad luck that had made him one?

Well, in the matter of Elsa’s murder, he would not fail.

The house was isolated: three miles from the hamlet of Hartling, six from anywhere else, fifteen from the Cathedral city inland. No neighbours, therefore, to be inquisitive; no friends even, as she had truly said—not here nor out of the past. No friends: only the little world of public house acquaintances, the Bills and the Barbaras, the Noras and the Toms, drifting in from the evening, drifting out into the night: nameless, homeless, without

existence for one another beyond the lit bar and clinking glasses, the boasting and the well-worn jokes. And even those, left behind now, in the gay city lights. Well, all right, O.K., he thought: no friends—so no one to stand as witness to the real motive—that tongue of hers that could strip a man down, bare, to his shuddering soul: and was to be endured no more.

The murder, he had decided, would have to be by drowning.

She had been a well-known athlete in her day; leaped higher or run faster, he never could remember which, than anyone in the world or in England or only in Surrey; he never could remember that either. But first and foremost she had been a swimmer: she cherished old photographs of herself, half out of the water in the Back Stroke or the Butterfly or whatever it was, forging along, tiny and sinewy, the vanquished spluttering in her rear. Those days were gone and the muscle turning to thick white fat; but she struggled, all honour to her, to keep it down and she still loved to swim. That had been the main reason for settling on this house: that close by was the tiny, deserted bay of Kittle Cove; and there she swam, morning and evening, and could never get enough. All alone—for such pastimes were not for Gerald Fletcher-Store—she would run off, the old regulation black woollen bathing dress under a bright beach-robe; tucking up beneath the white bathing cap as she ran, her rough, curly brown hair. Twenty minutes there, along the wild, lonely cart track, twenty minutes back: half an hour or more swimming around. ‘Keeps you fit,’ she would say, slapping the back of a hard little hand against his flaccid paunch. ‘I’ve got enough to do to keep me fit, digging in that filthy garden,’ he would say, ill-temperedly.

By drowning, then. An accident. But with such a good swimmer as she was, who would believe in an accident? His mind in the past had toyed, over a second whisky, with wild dreams of stopped-up snorkels and punctured water-wings, but she had no truck with such things: simply

plunged in and swam to a rock far out, and dived off the rock a few times and swam round about it and swam back. No records being created, no foolish chances taken: no difficult currents to beware of. Just straight-forward swimming for the sheer love of it.

If she were to drown then, she must do it while her murderer was well out of the way. To just go down there, push her head under the water and run screaming for help—that wouldn't do at all.

His wandering mind seemed to stand still all of a sudden: seemed to come slap up against the idea and just remain there, contemplating it. It had been those words: 'Push her head under the water.'

What was drowning, after all, but water forced into the lungs? You could drown in three inches in a basin, you could drown in your bedroom at home, just as easily as you could in the sea.

And then if you were *found* in the sea...!

Force her head into a bowl of water: drown her. Carry her down to the sea and throw her in. (A detail here: could they tell if the water in the lungs was salt water or fresh? Fetch a bucket of sea-water then, and drown her in that. And tip that away somewhere safe, too: no salt-encrusted pipes or wilting garden-flowers to give the game away.)

But what difference between 'finding' her dead in the sea, and having in fact drowned her there? They could still say you had pushed her head under the waves and then gone for help. An alibi—that was what one was going to need: an alibi. And his mind had got going again and worked cold and clear. Drown her here, put her body in the boot of the car. Have somebody in the house for an hour at least, while Elsa was supposed to be sporting it down in the bay. Get rid of the alibi, drive down to the cove—'I began to get anxious when she didn't return'—dump her in the sea: fish her out again and go for help. Time of death established by the post mortem—a

couple of hours earlier: but a couple of hours ago, one would have been sitting chatting, safe at home.

Only—chatting with whom? Who, in all this wasteland of dank woods and distant coast-line and beastly narrow lanes, would come to sit for an hour, chatting with him? And on the very night that the accident was set to occur. Not a soul had ever been to this house during the ten months of their resentful occupancy; every evening he sat, while Elsa went for her swim, and banged at his typewriter, listlessly trying to bash out a short story. (She would not let him write during the day: the hens and the pig and that horrible vegetable garden claimed him then. She said that the stories paid less than would cover the produce from their land; and in fact that was true. But when she was gone, he thought, off in reverie again, he would do not one more hand's turn on that filthy soil. If he had all day to write, no sneering interruptions from her—then, damn it all, he could really get going, he could really make a big thing of it; he *knew*.)

An alibi, then; an alibi! Someone who would keep company with him for an evening.

He could go to the pub, of course. What about that? Leave her dead, drive over to Hartling, spend an hour there; drive home, 'find she wasn't back', drive on down to the cove, programme as before. But then, who was to say that he had not done just this?—drowned her before he came to the pub, gone back and pretended to find her. No: somebody must actually see her start off to the cove, alive and well; who would then spend the next hour and a half with him. And he got up to wash out the whisky glass and put it away before she got back; and dropped the glass and, picking it up, pricked his thumb on a splinter: and thought, exultantly: 'That's it!'

It made him sick to do it, but when the time was ripe he contrived to get the fingers of his left hand entangled in the cutters of the lawn mower;

and, making rather more fuss than was necessary over the mangled mess—but that was in character—said to his wife: ‘What on earth shall I do? I’ve got this commissioned series hardly started and I couldn’t type a word with this.’ The series—six short stories of the war-time R.A.F.—had, needless to say, been commissioned by Mr. Fletcher-Store and by no one else.

‘Oh, well, Gerald, you really are too careless for words,’ said Elsa.

‘I didn’t do it on purpose, my dear, did I?’ he suggested, grinning up his sleeve.

‘Can’t you write it in long-hand, like I do?’

‘I can’t write in long-hand, you know I can’t.’ This was true. Every author has his own taboos and she was writer enough herself to know that unless he saw the words before him in print, no words would come. ‘If I could type,’ she said, ‘I suppose I’d have to do it for you; only I can’t.’ It was typical of her to resent the bare idea of doing for him, what she was not going to have to do anyway.

‘I suppose I shall just have to chuck it in,’ he said.

‘Chuck it in! The first and only chance of actually making a little decent money out of this rubbish of yours.’ She thought it over. ‘I suppose we couldn’t find a typist anywhere, in this God-forsaken hole?’

She had said it. She had actually suggested it herself. He had reconnoitred already in the pub at Hartling; now he went off and returned triumphantly to say that a female called Mrs. Butcher, whose husband worked late shifts or over-time or something, had been a typist before her marriage; and would be very happy to drive over in her Mini-car for an hour or two each evening, and help him out. He would think over the stuff as he dug and delved, said Gerald—for the bad hand was not to stop him from the necessary work with the vegetables and hens—and then she could take it down in shorthand, type it out next day and bring it back. Mrs.

Butcher, small, diffident, genteel, began to make her appearance at regular intervals. Elsa continued to go morning and evening for her bathe. Concealed in the tool shed stood a bucket of salt water, ready for The Day.

There remained only to set up a scapegoat, just in case by any chance the fact that Elsa had not drowned naturally might come to light. He began to drop small hints into the receptive ear of Mrs. Butcher. Mrs. Butcher was ever so surprised that Mrs. Fletcher-Store should care to go swimming all alone even on these moonlit nights. ‘Yes... Well...’ said Gerald, not actually speaking the words: ‘if she is alone.’ And permitted himself a sigh and resolutely went forward with the work. And he would see Elsa off—taking his time about it, to accustom Mrs. Butcher to a ten-minute absence—and come back into the room wearing a troubled look, a look of wretchedness resigned. ‘Got to put a good face on things,’ he once volunteered to Mrs. Butcher; and seemed about to blurt out confidences but, thorough gentleman that he was, bit the words back. Mrs. Butcher exuded sympathetic understanding but remained mute. What she thought of Mr. Fletcher-Store’s Raff reminiscences also remained unspoken.

The day came: an evening of moonlight, conveniently obscured by drifting patches of cloud. While Mrs. Butcher sorted out her work, he walked to the gate with Elsa and a short way down the path, as he had recently taken to doing ‘to be out of the woman’s way—she gets into such a flap’. Beyond the gate were some heavy rhododendron bushes and behind these he had left the bucket of salt water, and beside the bucket, the fleeced-lined jacket. ‘Good heavens,’ said Elsa, in her irritable way, ‘what on earth’s that doing here?’

‘I must have dropped it,’ he said, not bothering what excuse he made; and stooped and picked it up. And in a moment it was round her body, back to front, and tightly belted, pinning her arms to her sides, its over-long

sleeves muffling her hands and the possibility of scratching claws. And he had whipped out the bucket and pushed her head into it. She fought and struggled with all her wiry strength but he was half her weight again, and she strait-jacketed in wool and leather. Even before he could have hoped for it, it was all over. He pushed the body in beneath the bushes, tipped the water out of the bucket, hurried back to the shed and, with the jacket, left it there. And in no time at all, was back with Mrs. Butcher, the glass of whisky in his hand: it was a naughty little secret he had taught her to share with him, to account for passing minutes; this time he had had it all ready to hand. ‘Well, now,’ he said, ‘let’s get on.’

But the hand that held the glass was shaking and, ‘You look rather pale, Mr. Fletcher-Store,’ said Mrs. Butcher, all little-woman concern.

Even this he had been prepared for. ‘Damn hand’s pretty painful,’ he confessed. ‘Didn’t want to say anything.’ And indeed the struggle with Elsa had wrenched unpleasantly at the bandages, the whole thing was now violently throbbing. ‘Digging celery today; probably opened up the wounds a bit.’ He had even dug some celery, to make that ring true.

‘I don’t think you should be using it, honestly I don’t, for all this heavy outdoor work.’

‘Someone has to do it. Not that I mean... Clever woman, my wife, you know,’ said Gerald, stoutly. ‘Got to stick to her writing—that’s where the money lies. Famous in her day, you know. Not much fun for her, stuck out here,’ he added, after what appeared to be a moment’s rueful reflection. ‘Not after all that. Damn good-looking she was, you know, and a bit of a girl for the—’ But he broke off and looked away and took a gulp of whisky. ‘All quite innocent, Mrs. Butcher, of course.’

‘Oh, of course,’ said Mrs. Butcher, playing up to dear Mr. Fletcher-Store’s conjugal loyalty.

‘Not many people around here, Mrs. Butcher? I mean,’ he said, putting on an air of surreptitiously feeling his way, ‘not many people of—well, of our sort of age, you know? No one she could pal up with?—she and I, of course I mean.’

But no, Mrs. Butcher knew of nobody this side of Hartling and after that it was, well a very *church-y* crowd, all centring on the Cathedral, all as it were turning their backs on this part of the country and facing towards the city. ‘It’s mostly farm-hands and so on, who go to the pub in Hartling; even the farmers go into town for their amusements, in these days of fast cars. Fred, my husband, he works for old Lord Hartling, you see, or we wouldn’t be living out this way, I can assure you. If, any time,’ said Mrs. Butcher, timidly, ‘you and Mrs. Fletcher-Store would care to drop in on *us* for an evening... But I’m afraid I wouldn’t be much company for someone like her...’

Mr. Fletcher-Store made civil noises but she could see how abstractedly he gazed out of the window towards the bay where his lady supposedly disported herself in and out of the water with her problematical love. ‘Well, I suppose we must get on, or we shall never get done.’

By the time Mrs. Butcher was ready to leave, Elsa, strange to say, had not yet returned. ‘If I were you, Mr. Fletcher-Store, I’d be getting quite anxious. Won’t you run down to the cove and see that everything’s all right?’

‘Well, yes,’ he said, uncertainly, ‘I suppose I could.’

‘I mean, it’s getting very chilly. She can’t still be bathing.’

‘That’s just it,’ said Mr. Fletcher-Store.

‘You mean...? But, Mr. Fletcher-Store—oh, no! You can’t really mean...’

‘One doesn’t like to seem to be—well, spying.’

‘I could come with you,’ suggested Mrs. Butcher. ‘I would if you’d like me to. Then it wouldn’t look as if—’

‘Good heavens, no!’ said Gerald, violently. He covered up quickly: ‘I couldn’t let her have the humiliation of being—well, being found out—with a stranger present.’

‘But you don’t *know*. It may be all quite untrue. If we were to go down, talking quite loudly, so as to make ourselves heard... As you say, horrible if she were, well, quite innocent; and had to suspect you of creeping down, keeping a watch on her.’

He shook his head heavily. ‘I’m afraid, you know, it’s true enough. I’ve—well, to say it flat out, Mrs. Butcher—I’ve seen them.’ And in reverie, he *saw* them: strolling together across the wet sands. Elsa amorously gay, swinging the white cap in one hand, her rough brown hair all curls; he with his arm around her, a big chap, dark and good-looking. ‘A dark man, Mrs. Butcher, broad-shouldered, good-looking.’ He confessed, a bit shame-faced, ‘Actually, that’s why I was—sort of fishing about just now, asking you about the people round here.’

‘You actually saw her? With this man? But... It could have been just a chance meeting?’

‘Then why didn’t she tell me about it? And anyway, this wasn’t any chance meeting. One—well, one *knows*, doesn’t one?’

But Mrs. Butcher didn’t know and evidently didn’t want to know. ‘I’d better go,’ she said, ‘and leave you to deal with it. I think you should... Well, I don’t know what to advise, Mr. Fletcher-Store.’ And she got into her little Mini and wobbled off down the rutty lane towards Hartling. To suspect naughty assignations by moonlight was one thing, Mrs. Butcher’s departing rear-light seemed to say, winking in and out like a glowworm as she sped

through the night; but to *know*—that was much too much like horrid real life.

He went back to the rhododendron bush. Elsa was still lying there as he had left her. He ran to the shed, rinsed out the bucket—no tell-tale salt there—caught up his jacket and returned to her again. As he had hoped, the thick, soft wool lining had prevented weals upon her body and arms from the struggle. He picked her up—strangely leaden, she was, who in life had been so small and energetic: he had to fight back nausea at the feel of her, hanging so limply, yet heavily in his arms—and carried her to the car.

It was not a very large boot but he had better put her there; not that there was the faintest chance of his meeting anyone, but—well, be on the safe side, leave nothing to chance. A bit of a joke if there really was a lover, waiting for her down at the bay! However, surely he'd have gone home, long ago? Better keep a look out for any footprints, just in case.

It was slow going, down to the cove. The moonlight obscured and distorted the ruts and holes in the rough cart-way, long unused: the car jerked and jolted—he was terrified of what might be happening to the curled-up body in the boot: what marks might be inflicted that could tell tales. But he got her there at last and parked the car in deep shadow, and got out and stood looking down at the bay.

He had not been able to spend much time in reconnoitring—she might have thought it suspicious; and now he must work out how best he might get her down to the water, without leaving traces whereby a keen-eyed policeman could observe that he had borne across the sand a burden as heavy as he had carried back. He must pick a way carefully through the rocks that ran down on either side of the cove; and hope that the fast incoming tide would wash away even such traces as he might leave there.

First, however, he must run straight across the sand: straight across and then this way and that, a little, as though calling to her, searching for her. The sands would in time be covered by the tide but one might as well take no chances; and it would give him a legitimate reason, moreover, to look behind rocks and in the single small cave, just in case any observer might be lurking there.

But there was nobody; nor had there been—the sand was unmarked. He recollected that it should not be altogether unmarked—there should be prints of her own progress down to the sea. Well, he would have to make sure that no alarm was given until the tide had covered all—so in fact his artistic work of the past ten minutes would have been wasted. Never mind; there was time enough. He walked along through the ripples to the line of rocks and picked his way up through them, back to the car.

She was jammed in pretty tight; it took further time getting her out without inflicting scratches and bruises. But he had her at last and staggered with her, slipping and stumbling, back through rocky ways. Slipping and stumbling, carrying his murdered wife in his arms: with the moonlight brilliant, patching with silver the rippled black-treacle of the sea, the great rocks throwing nightmare shadows on the unscuffed sand. His arms ached and his back was nearly breaking, his damaged hand throbbed and bled through its bandages. He was almost physically sick with the strain of it by the time he reached the water's edge.

Along this coastline, nothing was simple: the bay was broken across by a row of rocks, at this moment of the tide's in-coming, already six inches below the water level. He splashed with his burden to a place upon the seaward side and there laid the body down—not for all the hounds of hell could he, as once he had proposed to himself, have flung her down or even let her fall; but knelt and turned her softly out of his arms, and let her lie; let

her lie there in the shallow water, face down in a cleft of the rocks, with the dark sea lapping over her, soaking her, salting her, weighting down the black woollen bathing dress with the damp drift of the sand, smearing with it her dead face and arms and hands: submerging her, soaking her, silting her up as though all the time for those past hours, she had been lying there. He had put on the tan jacket against the night chill and was now content to lean back against the rock and recover something of his strength before he must lift her once again, dripping now with sand and sea water, and carry her back to the shore. Something of his strength: and something also of his courage. ‘Stop thumping!’ he said to his racing heart, and ‘Be still!’ he said to his churning stomach and fogged, sick, swirling brain. ‘Pull yourself together: it’s all over, it’s finished now.’

And it was all over, and finished. Nothing now could go wrong: there was no false move he could make. He had but to lift her up, go back to the bay with her, lay her down somewhere above the high-water mark and drive like a mad thing into Hartling—for they had no telephone at home—with the news. The very first informed eye to see her would recognise that she had long been dead.

Meanwhile, gasping, leaning back, spent, against the rock, while the little ripples washed their evidence over his wife’s dead body, face down in the sand at his feet—he forced himself to run through the whole thing in his mind, just to make sure. Black costume, white cap, all correct: Mrs. Butcher had seen her leave the house in them; the beach-robe would logically be up there somewhere on the dry sand. The bucket of sea-water had been emptied out and rinsed; and who would look for signs of a drowning under a clump of rhododendron bushes at their gate? His own hands and arms were free from scratches and the jacket had kept her unmarked by the struggle before death: anything after death might surely be accounted for by

two hours of submersion, abraded by the rocks and the sand. He had examined the boot of the car to see that it held no signs of the rough journey to the bay; with every moment the tide was creeping up over such marks as he had made while he carried her down through the rocks. There was nothing to fear: nothing—even signs of agitation on his part would be accounted for by his natural distress. His wife had been seen to leave the house alive and well, he had been in Mrs. Butcher's company for the following hour and a half; examination would prove that Elsa had been dead during most of that time. And if all else failed, if accident ever came to be doubted—still there was the scapegoat lover who could never clear himself of suspicion because in fact he had no existence. 'All right,' he said, grimly muttering to the still body lying at his feet, 'a failure I may be and you've told me it, often enough. But not this time, my dear: not this time!'

And, sick with the effort of it, yet still resolutely strong, he picked her up and gathered her to him and, holding her in his arms, the white cap cradled against his shoulder like a lover with his lass, stepped out from behind the rock and to the beach.

Someone was there now. A small thin figure standing uncertainly at the top of the bay, looking out across the sea. And he saw that it was Mrs. Butcher. Well, all the better—just exactly what he needed. Curiosity alert, she would have gone home, thought it all over, crept back to do a bit of Peeping Tom and see what it was all about....And could now be a first-hand witness of the tragedy. He stood there, holding the lolling body cradled in his arms; and put on a face of grief and desperation as he waited for her advance.

And she advanced: screaming out suddenly, sharp and shrill, flying down the steep slope of the bank above and across the sands towards him: running, screeching—'You brute, you filthy, cheating, lying beast,

pretending you were working late; when all this time...!’ And she was upon him: and as beneath the violence of her assault he stumbled and half fell, spilling the body to the sands, plunged into his breast the kitchen knife she held in her hand.

And lay there for a moment, spread-eagled across him, tumbled over upon him by the violence of the knife thrust; and raised herself and looked down: and screamed out: ‘Fred? Oh, my God, it isn’t Fred! Oh, God, what have I done?’ And beat at the blood-drenched breast and cried: ‘But you told me it was Fred. You said he was there with her every night, making love to her you said; you said you *knew*. A big man, you said, dark and handsome—well, isn’t that Fred, what other man is there round here that looks like that?—only Fred.’ And as the red life-blood ebbed away, sinking into the white fleece, oozing out through the gashed tan leather above his heart, she sobbed: ‘And this is Fred’s jacket. The minute I saw it, I knew it, this—this horrible jacket of Fred’s...’

As Mrs. Fletcher-Store had long ago said, Mr. Fletcher-Store should have been more careful what he bought off strangers in pubs. And meanwhile...

Meanwhile: *hic jacet*. Here he lies.

The Merry-Go-Round

LINDA HARTLEY WAS SKIPPING with the Bindell twins, singing, to the well-known old tune, a verse of their own improvisation: a game at which Joy and Roy were, through long practice, past-masters.

‘One, two, three and four,’ chirped Joy,
‘Father locks the office door.
Five, six, seven, eight—
He pretends he’s working late.’

She tripped over the rope and Roy leapt in.

‘Nine, ten, eleven, twelve—
He’s not working by himself!’

They all three stopped skipping and burst into giggles. Joy took the rope and skipped by herself, changing the theme.

‘Pig, dog, cat and cow
Mother knows and what a row!
Horse, goat, rat and boar—
I was listening at the door.’

Linda was not so accomplished as the twins at it but she took the rope and had a go herself.

‘Sun, moon, day and night
My parents also had a fight....’

But she gave up and resorted to prose. 'My mother said my father had got to make *your* father make *your* mother get me into Hallfield.' Hallfield was the posh girls' school of Linda's aspirations: Joy was going there in the summer term. Mrs. Bindell was on the Board of Governors and, since she disapproved of Linda and looked down upon her mother, only too likely to oppose her election.

'Stove, grate, fire and hob,' sang Linda, skipping again. 'Your mother is an awful snob.'

'Awful,' agreed the twins, not singing. It must be ghastly for poor Linda, her father having married beneath him.

That Harold Hartley had married beneath him was acknowledged by one and all, not excluding Mrs. Hartley and himself. That he had had much the best of the bargain, occurred to none of them. Not that he was unkind to Louisa—not particularly; but he had always been a difficult, disagreeable man and of late had grown quite impossibly irritable—so ill-tempered and nervous and—suspicious; neurotic, Louisa supposed would be the word for it—he had even dug out an old war-time, smuggled-home revolver and kept it loaded in a drawer beside his bed. A nasty, black, ugly thing, she wouldn't so much as touch it herself, but it seemed to give him confidence. She sometimes wondered whether he wasn't the victim of some kind of mild blackmail—there was some oddly secretive visiting, now and then. Well, if that were so, she could only pray that it might continue—there seemed enough money to spare, and anything was worth paying that might prevent any smear of scandal from interrupting the triumphant progress through life of her darling Linda.

Linda was their 'only': a horrid child, really, but to the loving and simple heart of her mother, the very pink of perfection both in brains and in beauty. For Linda alone did she resent the social rebuffs of snobby little

Sanstone—led by Mrs. Bindell, the solicitor's wife. Why Mrs. Bindell should be so positively inimical towards her, she never could quite understand; that she resented the bosom-friendship of the twins with Linda was evident. To effect a separation, Louisa strongly suspected, she would certainly oppose Linda's entry to the new school. However, Harold must cope with that; Harold saw a good deal of Mr. Bindell over these property deals of his, and he would fix it...

But alas!—in grey December, Harold, in Louisa's own phrase, took ill and was about to die.

She sat with Mrs. Bindell in 'the lounge' while Mr. Bindell went up to the sickroom. 'Though it's not much use him going, Mrs. Bindell. It's days since poor Harold could speak a word, not to be understood; nor hold a pencil to write, or even make signs.'

'It is usual to call and enquire,' said Mrs. Bindell loftily, putting common little Mrs. Hartley in her place.

But Louisa, it seemed, had been right after all. Harold had been unable to say a word to Mr. Bindell. 'But he does seem to be trying to ask me something, Mrs. Hartley. Something he wants me to find for him or something like that. Do you know what it could be?'

'No, I don't,' said Louisa. 'We know about his will and all that. Something to do with the office, perhaps?'

'I'll go along there,' suggested Mr. Bindell, 'and get them to let me look around.'

But according to the office underlings, nothing was found that could account for Mr. Hartley's anxieties; and when she herself tried to question him, he rolled his head on the pillow and his look said as plainly as it had many times said during their life together, 'Mind your own business, Louisa, and leave me alone.' And the days passed away and so at last did

Harold; and at the Sanstone Crematorium, ashes to ashes returned, and that was the end of *him*.

Mr. Bindell waited a decent interval—a fortnight, he evidently considered sufficient—and then called upon the widow, this time without his lady. Linda had gone to the cinema with the twins. ‘So may I take it, Mrs. Hartley, that we are alone in the house?’

‘Well, yes,’ said Louisa startled. Was Mr. Bindell going to leap upon her with improper proposals, now that Harold was out of the way? She had always thought he had a nasty look.

But Mr. Bindell did not leap. Instead, he reached into his briefcase and brought out a large envelope. ‘You remember that your husband was trying to tell me something before he died?—trying to ask me to find something for him.’

‘Yes, I remember,’ said Louisa. ‘Did you find it? What was it?’

Mr. Bindell selected from the envelope a single item—a photograph on glossy art paper. He allowed Louisa one brief sight of it and then returned it to its envelope. ‘A collection of pornography,’ he said; and added: ‘The most lurid I’ve ever seen.’

Louisa thought, from her one glimpse, that this could hardly but be so. ‘*Harold* had this filth?’

‘In the private drawer of his safe at the office. Of course when I saw what it was, I concealed it from his staff.’ He snapped an elastic band round the envelope. ‘No wonder he didn’t want it found.’

‘No wonder,’ agreed Louisa, and thought of the gossip, spreading out and out in widening circles of ever more unsavoury scandal: nasty, dirty, salacious scandal, touched with that odd malice that, in so many quarters, Harold had seemed to attract. ‘Well, thank goodness, Mr. Bindell, that it was you who found it. And thank you very much for bringing it to me.’

Privately she thought that he might just as well have thrown the whole lot on the fire and not disturbed her in her widowhood; but he wanted thanks and appreciation, no doubt.

Mr. Bindell however wanted more than that and made very little bones about it. 'Money is tight these days, Mrs. Hartley. My wife likes to keep up a—a good establishment; and we have two children yet to educate. I know Hartley left you pretty well off, and you've only the one girl.'

She sat with her hands in her lap, very still. She had been right, then, about there being a blackmailer. Only—Mr. Bindell! Mr. Bindell, the upright, respectable solicitor; and Mrs. Bindell, giving herself such airs...! She said at last: 'How can you prove positively that they're his? They might be anyone's: you might even have—have got them for this very purpose.'

No fool, after all, Mrs. Hartley! Mr. Bindell reflected that these simple people had often very direct and rational minds. But he had been ready for it, anyway. 'You saw what a glossy print it was? He would—no doubt pore over the stuff: gloating over it, you know. The whole lot will be covered with his fingerprints.'

'I see,' said Louisa. 'So—?'

'One word from me in my position—one whisper going the rounds at a Rotary luncheon, one anecdote confided in a pub when we've all had a drop too much... Not nice for a young daughter, Mrs. Hartley, growing up in a small town like this.'

'No,' said Louisa, very white. She wasted no more words. 'How much?'

There are sixteen of them. Say a thousand pounds each. And you buy them outright: no hang-over. But one by one,' said Mr. Bindell. 'One by one. I can't have you selling out sixteen thousand pounds' worth of stock

and being unable to account, frankly and openly, for the reason. And who knows?—in time values in the pornographic market may rise.’

She did not haggle: she acquiesced at once. He might have been alerted by that, but he was not; he knew her simple soul and that in it there was room for nothing but her precious Linda. And over the next year or two, she could find the money easily enough: it wasn’t worth her putting up a fight. ‘Next Monday evening, then, at my office? Half past six, by the side door—I’ll leave it ajar—after the staff have gone home. I often stay on and work late.’

‘I’ll come if it’s raining,’ she said. ‘If it isn’t, I’ll come the first evening after that, that it does.’

‘Raining?’

‘I’d better not be seen, Mr. Bindell, making regular visits to your office out of hours. And there’s no disguise like an umbrella, is there?’

Shrewd, very shrewd: and quick off the mark with it too. ‘But unnecessary,’ he said. ‘It’s all offices round there, there’s never a soul about in the evenings.’

‘There’ll be even fewer about,’ she said, ‘if it’s wet.’

And on Monday it was wet; and she took him a thousand and four weeks later another thousand—hurrying through the deserted streets, head down against the driving rain: wearing a long, belted macintosh and with an umbrella up. They wasted no time. He would leave the door open, and be sitting waiting at his desk, a few papers scattered there relating to Harold Hartley’s affairs just in case they should be disturbed. And she would slip in and go up to his room on the first floor and hand over the small envelope with the notes in it and wait, unaffronted, while he checked them. And he would hold out the large envelope containing the pictures, and allow her to select one—she did it steadily, not averting her eyes, though her cheeks

would first go pale and then flush deeply—and tuck it into the big hand-bag she was careful to take with her; and so with hardly a word spoken, go her ways.

And meanwhile at home she swept and cleaned and polished as though—as though, now that he was gone, she would sweep and clean and polish away every touch, almost every memory, of Harold Hartley's past presence there. The only thing she did not polish—did not even touch—was the ugly, black revolver in the bedside drawer.

But on the third occasion she took the revolver out of the drawer, handling it carefully, wrapping it in a silk scarf; and put it in the large handbag. And this time she took no money with her.

She had thought it all out very carefully, reducing it to its simplest elements. Now she carried no open umbrella but clutched about her head and face a plastic 'pixie-hood'; and she had hoicked up the long macintosh by its belt so that the skirt came hardly down to her knees, and scuttled along with a wobble-wobbling gait on her highest heels... In the hall of the offices she dropped off the macintosh, slipped over her head a large plastic bag in which she had cut a hole for her face and another for her (rubber-gloved) right hand. So attired and holding the revolver, she walked without flurry up the stairs to Mr. Bindell's room.

He went very white when he saw the gun; whiter still when he took in the significance of the plastic covering. He stammered: 'For God's sake...! Don't shoot...! Take them, take the whole lot, I'll never tell a soul, I swear it—'

'Not even an anecdote in a pub?' she said, quoting, '—when you've had a drop too much.' And she pointed the gun at the left side of his chest and, giving herself no time to think, pulled the trigger. It was stiffer than she'd expected and for a moment the whole thing seemed strong and alive

in her hand; and there was more noise than she'd hoped—Harold had told her the gun was fitted with a silencer and she'd rather relied upon that. But at any rate, it did its work. At that range, it could hardly fail—and Mr. Bindell who had been unpleasant enough in life, was now most unpleasantly dead.

She put down the revolver upon the desk, stripped off the rubber glove and the spattered plastic. A gun, its origins untraceable—fingerprints on it of a man unknown, who could never be known, for his fingers, prints and all, were to ashes returned and in her well-polished home, no trace of him remained. But a man's fingerprints, that was the point: not a woman's. And a common, household, rubber glove, worn over a glove—firstly to obviate fingerprints inside the rubber, secondly to allow for a size that a man might have worn. And a plastic bag, never touched by her own fingers... And nothing in the world—for Mr. Bindell himself had been the careful one, the secretive one—to connect herself with him: not, at any rate from the lethal point of view.

She had brought with her a large envelope, addressed to herself at home, and ready stamped. Into this she put the envelope containing the photographs. In the hall she put on her macintosh again, belted it up very short and on her high-heeled shoes wobble-wobbled herself out of the side door again and into the rainy evening.

She had marked a convenient pillar-box between her home and the office. She now returned to it and there posted the envelope; in a dark corner behind it, let down the macintosh to its full length, took off the plastic hood, dried it carefully and rolled it away in its little plastic case. The handbag had been chosen, long in advance, to accommodate a folding umbrella. In her own image again, without the furtiveness and certainly without the wobble-wobble, she returned to Mr. Bindell's office; tried the

front door, put on a puzzled air, went round to the side door at last—went in, shaking the wet umbrella, called up the stairs, mounted to Mr. Bindell's door—shrieked like any startled woman upon seeing the blood-stained figure sprawled across the desk, ran to him, made such futile attempts as anyone might make to do something, anything... Pushed aside the horrid black gun, picked up the plastic with fastidious finger-tips and quickly dropped it again; at last picked up the telephone...('Well, I may just have touched things—if there are any fingerprints on them, then I must have, but I was so shocked I hardly knew what I was doing... And blood, yes, there may be blood on me, on my clothes—but I did try to lift his head, I did handle the blood-spattered telephone....') Meanwhile, however, she contented herself with dialling the police. 'Do please come quickly! It's dreadful. Yes, Mr. Bindell—you know, the solicitor. Yes, I came to see him on business—the papers are right here on his desk; he said to drop in any time, he'd be working late...'

The investigations took simply ages. It was not for several months that widowed Mrs. Hartley felt the time ripe to call upon widowed Mrs. Bindell. 'I thought I should have a word with you about Linda's acceptance to Hallfield School.'

'That matter comes up before the Board on Tuesday,' said Mrs. Bindell—by this time well back in harness.

'Then Linda will start with Joy next term,' said Louisa—and it was a statement.

'*If* we decide to admit her,' said Mrs. Bindell.

'I think you'll decide to admit her all right,' said Louisa. She produced a large envelope and slid out a couple of glossy black and white prints. 'Disgusting, aren't they?'

'Where on earth—?' cried Mrs. Bindell, absolutely shocked.

‘That night I found your husband dead,’ said Louisa. ‘I told the police that I touched nothing in his office, Mrs. Bindell, but that wasn’t quite true. He had evidently been taken by surprise when the murderer came: this—filth—was spread out on the blotter in front of him.’ Mrs. Bindell opened her mouth as though to speak but shut it again. ‘I happened to have a large handbag and I gathered the things up and brought them away with me. I thought,’ said Louisa, limpidly, ‘that you wouldn’t care for them to be found by anyone else. No one wants a scandal; and you, with all the work you do in this town—Board of Governors at Hallfield, for example—you’d be particularly susceptible, wouldn’t you?’ Mrs. Bindell tried again to speak and again fell silent. ‘You’re going to suggest perhaps,’ said Louisa, ‘that I can’t prove that these pictures belonged to him? But these people—well, pore over this kind of stuff, so I’ve been told: sort of gloating over it, you know: and this glossy paper will be covered with his fingerprints.’

Mrs. Bindell seemed to think about it, sitting in a saggy heap, all the bounce and arrogance gone from her. She said at last, arriving surprisingly quickly on the whole at a proper conclusion: ‘How much shall I have to pay?’

Louisa had handed over two thousand pounds to Mr. Bindell. Say another thousand for pain and stress, not to mention what might, she supposed, be called ‘danger money’. ‘I’ll take three thousand down,’ she said. ‘That’s to settle—well, a kind of debt. And then of course there’s the matter of Linda getting into Hallfield. After that...’ She shrugged. ‘I’m not hard up, Mrs. Bindell; financially I shall be quite safe—now. So it won’t be a matter of cash. Just as long as my Linda gets along happily and successfully in Sanstone. Of course the right school is going to help, and then she and Joy might take some course together, modelling or whatever it is they’ll have set their hearts on by then; and of course knowing the right

people helps too, and going to all the parties...' She returned the envelope to her bag. 'The secret will be safe with me,' she said. 'I don't go to Rotary lunches or get drunk in pubs.' And she fastened the bag with a snap and got up to leave. 'Monday afternoon, perhaps, you could drop the money in at my house?—when you call to invite me to run a stall at the bazaar you're organising for Lady William. I've never been asked even to help there; and though to be honest I don't think I've missed much, still, everybody else goes and I'd like to know Lady William. I believe her children are charming, and the boy's about three years older than my Linda... One never knows, does one?' She thought it over for a moment, puzzled. 'Now what exactly would his title be?'

'The Honourable,' said Mrs. Bindell, flat voiced.

'It's going to be a great help,' said Louisa, 'having you to help me over little things like that.'

Linda and Joy were skipping again, Roy being up at the house 'key-holing'. He joined them, breathless, and seized up the rope. He addressed his song to Linda.

'Cod, skate, sturgeon, shark—
Your mother's on the blackmail lark!
Whale, walrus and sea-cow—
She's got the feelthy peectures now!

'No?' said Linda.

'Yes, she has,' said Roy. He went on skipping.

'Sea, lake, river, pool—
So you're going to Hallfield School.'

‘No?’ cried Linda and Joy, together this time, excitedly. ‘Yes, you are; and what’s more,’ said Roy, skipping again—

‘Men and horses, hare and hounds—
You’re going to get three thousand pounds,
And go around with Joy and me
And marry the ar-is-toc-racy...’

He stopped skipping altogether and they all rolled about with laughter, hugging one another triumphantly.

‘Well, honestly, can you believe it?’ said Linda, when at last they stopped, exhausted. ‘Grown-ups!’

‘What a flap if any of us so much as cheats a bit at school!’

‘I suppose this means that it really was my mother who shot your father?’

‘Of course it was,’ said Roy. ‘She knew these floozies had been going to his office after hours—all Sanstone knew it. Just hoicked up her skirt and looked like a teenager trying to walk like Marilyn Monroe. The police thought some boy-friend or father or someone had been watching, and went in and did for him. Of course they knew nothing about the blackmail.’ He exchanged a suddenly exultant glance with his sister. It might some day be profitable to be the only ones in the world who knew that Mrs. Hartley was a murderess.

Linda saw nothing of the glance. ‘It’s jolly decent of you to take it like this.’

‘Oh, well, we didn’t like him very much, did we, Roy?’

‘We don’t like any grown-ups very much,’ said Roy.

‘And I must say, considering that he was blackmailing her with the Feelthy Peeectures after my father died—he did deserve what he got.’

‘M’m. On the other hand,’ said Roy, ‘your father had been blackmailing *him* with them for years. So it was really only tit for tat.’ And he caught up one end of the rope and Joy caught up the other and Linda flew into the middle; and as they turned and skipped, they all three gaily sang,

‘Tit for tat and knick for knack—

The biter bit the biter back.

Hound hunts fox and fox hunts hound—

Oh, what a merry old merry-go-round!’

Upon Reflection

THE RAIN HAD STOPPED. Mrs. Dorinda Jones sat back, very small and exquisite in the corner of her taxi cab, fastidiously holding her damp umbrella. The traffic was jammed solid but she was sufficiently entertained (between uneasy glances at the steadily ticking meter) by contemplation of a rather divine pair of boots in a shop across the road—and the new nursing home in process of completion, a little ahead and to the left of her.

The nursing home was being financed by Arab oil, a magnificent edifice apparently hewn from a block of gleaming black marble, with lots of lovely curlicues in what was doubtless solid gold. She was amused to observe with what opportunist haste a very grand new restaurant had been opened next door to it—apparently for an Arab clientele, for dozens of white-robed gentlemen were at this very moment pouring out, evidently from some celebration luncheon. The commissioner, enormously impressive in scarlet coat, peaked cap and prodigious brass buttons, was dashing from the door of one magnificent car to another, crumpling into a white cotton palm the unconsidered five and even ten pound notes.

One of the Arab gentlemen, Mrs. Jones recognised as Sheik Horror-horror. Well, she called him that to herself—one read these foreign names in the papers and never got around to actually pronouncing them. And a proper horror he seemed to be, rich as Croesus but grinding away at the faces of the poor, back home in Where-ever-it-was, and well known to have slain off all sorts of nice, harmless people, including several wives and even a couple of expendable sons, who had stood between himself and some monstrous coup or other. Mrs. Dorinda Jones is an ardent, if not very accurate, follower of the more sensational items of world news.

A small gap had opened in the traffic and her taxi moved forward a few yards. She diverted her gaze to the boots in the shop opposite which now more clearly came into view—and when she looked round again, one of the magnificent cars had crept up beside them, between herself and the new building: the curlicues seemed to be Arab writing after all. And Sheik Horror-horror was on a level with her, lying back in a corner of the Rolls, his hands folded in the lap of his flowing white gown. His eyes were closed but he opened them for a moment, gave her a baleful glare, and closed them again. But what was really most peculiar, thought Mrs. Jones, was that he now had with him in the car the most extraordinary companion. The Rolls was on the V.I.P. pattern, with glass cutting off the driver's seat from the driven; and behind the glass two little tip-up, forward-facing seats, such as young princes are wont to perch upon, on Royal occasions. And on one of the seats, staring straight ahead of him was a rough looking man—not an Arab, a white man, a good old Cockney type he looked, middle-aged, with a sharp profile, untidy dark hair and, from what she could glimpse of it, a cheap, rather shabby old jacket. A bodyguard? But what a strange sort of bodyguard to be chosen!—and anyway, Sheik Horror-horror was known to disdain any sort of protective entourage—a man so universally detested (he might well consider) would be unable to rely upon anyone at all and might as well just trust to himself. There were other reasons also, she was to learn, for his preferring to travel unattended. Not pretty reasons at all—if ever there was a born murderess, Sheik Horror-horror was *it*.

And so indeed it was to prove. That very evening, there was headline news—the chauffeur had driven up to the palatial mansion somewhere outside Ascot, and the welcome-home party, scurrying out to open the door and usher His Excellency forth, had discovered him slumped all anyhow in his corner, with a dagger plunged into his back.

The chauffeur's name was Smith, an Englishman; and by the following morning, Smith found himself in the situation known as 'helping the police with their enquiries.' The Sheik had been seen off from the restaurant alive and well, the way home passed through some quiet countryside and Smith had confessedly been alone in the car with him all that time. The weapon proved to have been a knife of Arabic design, used universally both as weapon and decoration. It bore no finger-prints.

Mrs. Dorinda Jones lapped up every word of it. But... 'Alone in the car with him...' 'How very odd!' said Mrs. Jones to herself and she rang up a very grand person at Scotland Yard—Mrs. Jones knows simply *everyone*—and said: 'But what about the rough looking man?'

The chauffeur, Smith, received the information about the rough looking man with passionate gratitude. His own position was dicey in the extreme. Blood had been found on his hands and uniform—he had of course helped to get the body out of the car—and he'd never made a secret and therefore could make none now, of his fear and loathing of his employer. Certainly he had admitted to having seen no intruder, rough looking or otherwise; but the car had been crawling through the traffic, frequently at a standstill—and the glass partition was sound-proof and opaque; perfectly possible for someone to have entered and left the car, without his being aware of it. 'He did a lot of talking business in the back of that car, sir,' said Smith, earnestly explaining to the police. 'And—other things.'

He had been with the Sheik for several years, living in a lodge in the grounds of the mansion and driving the Rolls whenever His Excellency was in England. A cushy job—yes, indeed—except when His Excellency was in England. *Not* a considerate employer, the suspect quite frankly confided: ill-tempered, intemperate and bullying and downright diabolical to those poor

bastards he'd bring with him when he came over from Where-ever-it-was—it had made Smith's blood boil to see it. And one habit he'd had... 'He'd pick up these poor girls, sir, in some night club or other and drive them home—even through the soundproof glass, I've heard the screams. And then I'd be got up at any hour of the night to drive them back where they belonged. More dead than alive some of them, poor little creatures; I swear it used to make me sick.'

'Not so sick that you thought of telling the police?'

But Smith had seen what happened to those few wretches who had ever dared to rebel against Sheik Horror-horror; and you could get away and hide at the ends of the earth, his thugs would still find you out. Besides.... 'Poor kids, they'd hired themselves out, sir, hadn't they? And been paid. Paid fortunes, sir. And taken the money. Gone wrong in life, poor little devils,' said Smith, 'and lost their way and come to this.'

M'm. Mr. Smith wouldn't by any chance have a daughter himself, who had lost her way in life—?

'Me, sir?' said Smith. He drew himself up. 'Do I look like a man who could have a daughter fallen to such depths as that?'

But he'd forgotten, confided her highly placed friend to Mrs. Jones, that he wasn't now wearing a smart uniform and peaked cap; in mufti, any man might look as though he could have had a daughter gone wrong. Which could have been a motive—

'But what about my rough looking man?' insisted Mrs. Jones. 'I mean that *must* let him out?'

And in fact it did. The cab driver was sought and found, and conceded that, though he'd been looking ahead, watching the traffic, he might just have caught out of the corner of his eye, a glimpse of the rough looking man in the Rolls. The police sighed heavily and said goodbye to Mr. Smith.

No one, not even back home in Where-ever-it-was, as Mrs. Jones would have said—was anything but delighted that Sheik Horror-horror had got his just deserts. It was highly embarrassing to the British Government, all the same. The police are understood to be keeping a sharp eye out to this day for Mrs. Dorinda Jones' rough looking man.

Mr. Smith, however, in an ecstasy of gratitude, approached Mrs. Jones with a large—if rather ill-assorted—bunch of flowers. He had now joined a car-hire firm and any time Mrs. Jones wanted to do a bit of shopping—that would be on the house. Mrs. Jones accepted with simple delight and upon their first excursion suggested driving past the scene of the crime: there had been a rather divine pair of boots in the window of a shop, and she wondered if they might not still be there.

At the Arab restaurant, the lunch time rush had not yet begun and the commissionaire came forward hopefully when the traffic halted their car outside its doors. He seemed to recognize her—Mrs. Jones is highly photogenic and her pictures had vied in the papers with Identikit portraits of the rough looking man—and his large, florid face took on a rather strange tinge of grey. 'How odd!' thought Mrs. Jones. 'Just a minute,' she said to Smith, and stepped out of the opened door. 'You've given up your nice white cotton gloves,' she said to the commissionaire.

He went greyer still. 'I found that they showed the dirt, Madam.'

'And stains? But if they got stained, you could take them off and stuff them into a pocket. And then of course, there's the question of fingerprints.' She looked at him very kindly. 'Have you by any chance got a young daughter?' she said.

His hands were beginning to shake: it was horrible. 'I had a daughter, Madam,' he said. 'She's dead now. She died in hospital of—injuries.' He pulled himself together. 'The police asked me these questions, Mrs. Jones.

It was you, yourself, who told them that when you saw him in the car driving away from here—the Sheik was alive and well.’

‘He was alive,’ said Mrs. Jones. ‘I wouldn’t know about well. He did open his eyes, it’s true, and looked at me. But—I ought to have realised it before—not at all the look that a gentleman all that keen on girls might be expected to give one. A terrible look—almost as though... Well, almost as though I’d stabbed him in the back. Or *someone* had stabbed him in the back. Then his eyes closed again.’

A silence. He said at last: ‘What will you do?’

‘I’ll have to think about it,’ said Mrs. Jones. ‘I mean—there’s one’s duty and all that. But I’d let you know first.’ She got back into the car, but before he closed the door on her, she leaned out and put her small, gloved hand on his arm. ‘I’m very, very sorry about your daughter,’ she said.

It was an awful situation, all the same. ‘*I* don’t know,’ she said to Smith as the car moved on again. ‘Ought one to tell?’

They came once more opposite the black marble nursing home with its golden curlicues. ‘You’ve forgotten, Madam,’ said Smith. ‘There’s still the rough looking man.’

‘Oh, yes, so there is,’ said Mrs. Jones, thankfully. She gave no thought at all to the divine boots in the shop across the road. ‘We’d stopped just about here. The man was sitting...’ She broke off. A car was drawn up at the door of the nursing home, a patient being assisted to alight. Only the driving seat was now occupied. ‘What an odd coincidence!’ said Mrs. Jones. ‘Their chauffeur has just the same uniform as you have.’

Smith turned his head to look and in the same movement the chauffeur turned and looked straight back at him. ‘Yes, he has, Madam, hasn’t he?’ said Smith. ‘And what’s more—just the same face.’

‘Oh,’ said Mrs. Jones in a very small voice. ‘Yes. So he has!’ She thought it all over in her own cool little way. ‘That day,’ she said. ‘It was raining. I had my umbrella up and my head down—I suppose I never looked at my taxi driver at all. Not to recognise him if I saw him—well, in some different situation.’

‘In a mirror, for example,’ said Smith. ‘That black marble, you know—when it’s wet, it does get a shine on it. You could see your face in it, really you could.’

‘Or somebody else’s. I saw my own taxi driver, didn’t I?’ said Mrs. Jones, humbly. ‘He’d be sitting a bit ahead of me like you are now. And, through the window of the car drawn up beside me, I’d see him in the mirror of black marble and he’d look as though he were sitting in that car!’

‘That’s the way I’d worked it out,’ said Smith. ‘Last time I drove past here on a rainy day. I daresay when the police were here, it happened always to be fine.’

‘Yes. Well. I suppose one ought to whizz off this *minute* and confess to them?’ She didn’t seem too much delighted at the prospect.

‘Perhaps one should. On the other hand,’ said Smith, ‘you never saw those girls like I did, Madam, when His Excellency had done with them. Crying all the way home in the car, poor little devils. And that chap, the commissionaire—his girl, she’s dead. Died in hospital, he said.’

‘So if everyone just goes on believing in the rough looking man....I really do think on the whole that I ought to keep quiet about it. Don’t you, Smith?’ said Mrs. Dorinda Jones, hopefully. She added: ‘Upon reflection.’

From the Balcony...

FROM THE BALCONY UP there, they could see right down into her house. And she knew that they talked about her. The old woman sat out on every fine day in her wheel-chair, peering down through the railings with nothing else to do, but watch.

‘I knew it,’ said the old woman. ‘There she goes again! Dipping a great hunk of bread into the curry sauce.’

‘“Tasting it,” ’ said her daughter, with a sneer.

‘Gobbling it,’ said the old woman. ‘Then she’ll sit down to her supper and eat a great dob of it on a mound of rice. No wonder she’s fat.’ She herself, long ailing, was very thin.

‘Fat!’ said the daughter. ‘She’s disgusting.’ *She* was not thin but slim. She ate sensibly, carefully, keeping herself slim. Her husband loved and admired her for her beautiful figure. ‘What can the husband think, married to such a mountain of flesh?’

Mrs. Jennings was not a mountain of flesh but she was over-weight and it was true that her husband found her unlovely in consequence. ‘Aren’t you having any curry?’

‘No, I picked when I was cooking. I must pay for it.’

‘Well, that makes a change,’ he said, finishing up her share.

‘I thought you’d rather admire me,’ she said, trying a little joke. ‘It’s a long time since I did that,’ he said.

They were out there again, next day, the old woman in her chair, the rest popping in and out, waiting on her—the old grandfather, the daughter and

her husband, a couple of teen-age kids. The Family, Mrs. Jennings called them to herself, with a capital F. They could see everything. They could see into the kitchen, all the front rooms, upstairs and down; even part of the garden at the back of the house. Mrs. Jennings' garden had a tiny swimming pool. 'Don't tell me she's going in!' said the boy, coming out with a glass of nice cold milk for Gran'ma. 'What'll the displacement be?'

'Flood the garden,' said his sister, sniggering.

'That I *would* like to see,' said the old woman. 'Her in one of them bikinis.'

Mrs. Jennings in fact did not venture into the pool. 'Those people would have been watching me,' she said, excusing herself to her husband when he came home. 'Saying things about me.'

'Some old trout in a wheel-chair,' he said. 'What the hell does she matter?' The Family were a frequent source of disagreement; sometimes, she thought, the original cause of it all. Was it not her complaints about them that had first drawn his attention to her increase in over-weight, so gradual a process that he had hitherto been blind to it?

'So you didn't go for a wallow?' he said. 'Pity. It might tone up that flab of yours.'

'Yes, I know. So I came in and did some hard housework instead.'

'Well, she's given that up. Now we'll begin on some housework,' said the old woman to her granddaughter, looking down into the drawing room. 'You wait!—twenty minutes and she'll be on the sofa, gorging biscuits.'

It was true that, carrying so much overweight, Mrs. Jennings got easily tired, doing housework. 'But I'm not going to eat anything,' she said to herself. 'I know that old hag up there watches everything I touch.' She

could not resist a cup of coffee, however, and an hour later was still stretched out on the sofa, doing the crossword. 'A bit more exercise would do her good,' said the old grandfather. 'All that money—better for her to be a bit hard up, have to go out to work. *And* on foot,' he added, almost savagely.

'And how did you bestir yourself today?' asked Mr. Jennings, sitting down to a well-filled dinner plate. He was not such a beauty himself, reflected Mrs. Jennings; not as svelte as all that. 'I did a big household shop,' she said. Only at the last minute had she succumbed and taken a taxi home. 'All by bus,' she said, fibbing. 'Parcels and the lot.'

'I bet,' said Mr. Jennings on an unlovely, jeering note.

'Well, nearly all. Oh, and I took your suit to the cleaners. There was a letter in the pocket. I put it on your desk.'

He went a shade pale. 'Having had a good look at it first?'

'No, I didn't,' she said. 'I don't read other people's letters.'

'All women read other people's letters,' he said. 'Especially their husbands'.'

'Well, I don't and I didn't. Why should I?'

'I simply took the girl out to lunch,' he said, defensive.

'The girl? What girl?'

'The girl in the letter. A thin girl,' he said.

'Got a girl friend now,' the old woman was saying, cosy now indoors in the sitting room. Friends had come in for coffee and the Family were regaling them with the continuing story of That Woman Opposite. 'Brought her home the night old Fatso was away—whatever took her away, but she was gone for the night. And in they come, like a couple of rabbits to the burrow,

him and this floosey with him. You could follow the lights—hall, sitting room—lights on in the sitting room—lights out in the sitting room, lights on up the stairs—lights on in the bedroom, lights off in the bedroom...’

‘What’s she like?’ said the grandchildren.

‘Thin,’ said the old woman.

So now she really went to work, dieting hard. It was a weary business all the same, depriving yourself, starving yourself, losing weight, yes, but so gradually that nobody noticed it—never really anything to show. ‘Well, you’re not all that fat,’ said her doctor. ‘Lose a couple more and you’ll be a sylph.’ A couple more stone he meant.

‘I’m eating literally nothing.’

‘What’s nothing?’ he said.

‘No meals,’ she said. ‘But I pick when I’m cooking. I lick the spoon. Well, I can’t help it. I’ve got to cook rich things for my husband and I have to taste while I’m going along, haven’t I?’

‘Why must you cook rich things for him?’ he said. ‘Couldn’t he manage on something less destructive to *you*?’

‘Oh, no, he loves those things, he wants everything cooked in cream. And I’ve got to give him what he wants.’

‘I expect it’s really because you like licking the spoons,’ he said, laughing.

‘Licking the spoons,’ said the old woman’s daughter, leaning over the balcony rail to look down into the lighted kitchen. ‘See her? Half a pint of double cream, that looks like to me; and there she’ll be, dipping the spoon in every other minute, licking away... And chocolate sauce, that’ll be for the ice-cream; hot chocolate sauce, that’s her favourite. Some stuff she puts

into it, fetches the bottle from the dining room, and then great spoonfuls to see she's got it just right...'

'What's this muck?' said Mr. Jennings that night. 'It's got far too much kirsch in it. You haven't got it right.'

'I'm trying to keep off tasting all the time.'

'Yes, well while you're on that lark, I'll have my dinners elsewhere,' he said.

So there was no more tasting. Sick with knowledge of her own lack of appeal, Mrs. Jennings accepted his absences, increasingly frequent and prolonged, and since she made no objection, he shrugged and went his way. 'He's left her,' said the Family, adding pity to contempt. 'Well, almost. Keeps up the outward pretence. But it won't be long now.'

Mr. Jennings kept up the pretence because it suited him to do so; the thin lady was keeping up pretences of her own. But at home, he troubled not at all. 'If you don't like it,' he said, 'look in the mirror. Just ask yourself, whose fault is it? You're disgusting.'

'It's her own fault,' said the people opposite.

She began to diet in real earnest. Now that the tasting was over, it wasn't any great hardship. She had spoken the truth when she said that she by no means grossly over-ate or indeed over-ate at all—not by standards other than her own. It was simply that with her particular metabolism, she more easily put on fat. And with so little cooking to be done for her husband, the weight loss became, if gradual, at least very steady. 'I live almost entirely on salads now,' she said to her doctor.

‘If she eats any more of them greens,’ said the old woman on the balcony, watching her stagger home, laden with lettuces, ‘she’ll turn into a rabbit.’

‘Lashings of salad cream,’ said the daughter, who never touched anything, herself, but a dab of malt vinegar, ‘what’ll you bet?’

‘Mind, she’s losing!’

‘Skinny,’ said the old woman. ‘Much more of it and she’ll be skinny.’

‘Doesn’t suit her,’ said the husband. ‘She was better fat.’

‘She was never all that fat. What’s she messing herself about for?’

‘Never get him back that way,’ said the Family, comfortably.

‘You were a lot too fat,’ said Mrs. Jennings’ husband, on one of his now rare visits home, ‘and now you’re a lot too thin.’

‘Don’t you like me thin?’

‘I don’t like you at all,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ she said, shocked. She ventured: ‘You used to like me once. When I was slim.’

‘You’re not slim now,’ he said. ‘You’re gaunt.’

‘She’ll take to the drink,’ said the old grandmother. ‘You watch!’

She had given up even the six o’clock half-glass of sherry. Now, sad and lonely, faced with an evening meal of yet more lettuce, she took to the habit again. Had a half glass—a whole glass—a couple of glasses: before the evening salad—before the lunchtime salad—at eleven o’clock. ‘I see they’re delivering from the wine shop regular,’ said the grandfather. ‘*And* the hard stuff. Not sherry any more and that derbonny.’

‘You’re not drinking too much?’ said her doctor.

‘Only what they call “socially”.’

‘I’m not too sure that it isn’t a drop more than that?’

‘You’ve been talking to the people opposite,’ she said.

‘The people opposite?’

‘In the flats. They watch me from the balcony there.’

‘Well, *I* don’t know them, do I?’ said the doctor. ‘How could I talk to them?’

‘They watch me all the time. Criticise me among themselves.’

‘How do you know?’ he said.

‘Well, I’m sure. What else would they watch me for? There’s an old lady, an invalid, she sits in her chair and watches me through the railings of the balcony, she’s got nothing else to do. And the Family come in and out and they talk about me.’

‘How do you know they talk about you? You can’t hear them.’

‘What else would they talk about?—hanging over the balcony up there, looking down, watching me. What else has the old woman got to interest her?—she talks about me to them, and then they all talk about me together. There’s nothing I do that they don’t know about. They’ve watched me get fat and stay fat, and get thinner; and get fat again and now get too thin and stay too thin. I’m so fixated on salad stuffs now, I seem never to eat anything else. I expect they know that too. Everything I do, they see, they comment on.’

‘Maybe they talk kindly?’

‘No, they don’t. Why should they? They’ve seen me drive my husband away, making myself so unattractive, they’ve seen him with his mistress, he brought her to the house once, I smelt her scent on my pillow...’

‘Perhaps they criticise *him*?’

‘No, they don’t,’ she said. She said again, ‘Why should they? You can’t blame him.’ But in her heart, she blamed him. She had tried very hard and

he had been cruel. She thought to herself with fear that by now she was beginning to hate him.

‘Well, well,’ said the doctor. There seemed nothing else to say. But he did advise: ‘Go easy on the booze, my dear.’

‘Alcoholics Anonymous any day now,’ said the old woman, from her wheel-chair.

In the doctor’s waiting room Mrs. Jennings had leafed through the magazines. ‘Go out and get a new hair-do,’ they all advised, as a way to reclaim lost love. ‘Have a facial, dress yourself up a bit glam.’ She went out and got a new hair-do, had a facial, bought some bright-ish new clothes. ‘What in God’s name are you doing to yourself now?’ said Mr. Jennings, on the next of the rare visits. They were becoming almost non-existent.

She had had a little drinkie and now she embarked upon another of her humble jokes. ‘I read in a magazine that the way to get back my husband’s love was to make myself look glamorous.’

‘Well, you’ve made yourself look a freak,’ he said.

More than one little drinkie, actually; several little drinkies. She tottered up to her feet, took the decanter by its stout glass neck and lifted it above her head. He gave her one look of stunned amazement and, as the bottle hit him, stepped back and fell, grazing his temple on the hard edge of the marble mantelpiece. She put back the decanter slowly on its tray and knelt down beside him. After a little while she realised that he was dead.

Wonderful how it sobered you up. One minute, you were half tight, reeling, stupefied, boiling up within you the pain and indignation of the ultimate insult; and all of a sudden cool again, cold again, aware and very much afraid. But thinking, quickly. I hardly touched him. Well, yes, I hit him. But he scraped his head on the mantelpiece as he fell, it could have

been that. I could just have been—talking to him. He'd had a few drinks before he came, he slipped and fell backwards, he banged his poor head. I didn't hit him, I didn't touch him, it's nothing to do with *me*. And she picked up the decanter and wiped from its neck any grip marks that might be there, and handled it as though it had been used merely for pouring out whiskies, and put it back on its tray. And knelt down again—and touched with her fingers the blood oozing from his head wound, and tweaked out a grey hair, and stood up and smeared her finger against the edge of the mantelpiece, and held the hair against it so that it stuck there....It was horrid, doing it, but she knew, as she had known at the doctor's with a flash of insight, that in fact she no longer loved him, wouldn't really have wanted him back: to touch him did not terribly upset her. It will be nicer without him, she thought. I can move away, where I won't be looked down on, be talked about, by those horrible people up there, out on the balcony.

Out on the balcony! On this sunshine-y evening, they would be out on the balcony—leaning over, peering into her window: seeing it all!

'He's fell over,' said the old woman. 'He's lying there. She's—what's she doing now?'

'Leaning over him,' said the daughter. 'He's dead, she can see he's dead. She's killed him.'

'Hit him with that there glass bottle,' said the daughter's husband. 'What's she up to now?'

'Wiping the neck of it,' said the granddaughter.

'Covering up her traces,' said the grandson, eagerly.

'Kneeling down again. She's... Will I never!' said the daughter. 'What's all this for?'

'Blood on the mantelpiece. She's going to pretend he hit his head there. Going to pretend he was drinking and fell over. Just slipped and fell,

she never hit him, it's nothing to do with *her*. I'll tell you what,' said the old grandfather, slowly, 'I think we should inform the police....'

Mrs. Jennings stood listening—listening....She could almost hear them now, she knew so well what they would be saying. After a little while, she went to the telephone. 'Police? Would you come round.' She gave her address. 'I think I've just killed my husband. He's lying here dead.' She replaced the receiver and went and stood in the window, looking up at them. 'I don't know why I said "I think",' she said. 'You'll tell them anyway.'

'Police?' the daughter's husband was saying. 'You'd better come round. We've just seen a murder committed.'

'Yes, it was I who phoned you,' said Mrs. Jennings when the police arrived. 'But you've had a call already. From the people opposite. Up there, in the balcony flat. They watch me,' said Mrs. Jennings. 'Everything I do, they know all about me!' She glanced down at her fleshless frame in the too-smart new clothes; glanced at the dead body on the floor. 'Everything,' she said. 'They spy on me, they criticise; I never get away from them....They've ruined my life. If it hadn't been for them, I don't think—this—would ever have happened.'

The officer made a sign to his sergeant and himself knelt down beside the body, glanced up at the mantelpiece, at a grey hair on the edge of it and a smear of blood. 'Fell against this?' he suggested, standing up, easing his cramped back. 'Stepped back, tripped over the mat, something like that?—hit his head as he went down?'

'Do you mean—an accident?' she said.

'Well, that's the way it looks. Is there something,' he suggested, made very curious by the tone of her voice, 'that you'd like to tell me?'

‘They’ll tell you anyway. The people opposite. It wasn’t an accident. I picked up the decanter and hit him with it. He insulted me. Just once too often. He insulted me.’

‘You hit him?’

‘With the decanter. He dodged back, trying to avoid it and then he fell and hit his head, but only a little bit, against the mantelpiece. But I hit him first.’

‘You mean, to—’

‘Oh, yes, to kill him. I might as well admit it.’ She repeated, ‘They’ll tell you anyway.’

‘The people opposite?’

‘They’ll have been watching. They’re always watching. The old woman in her wheel-chair: what else has she got to do? And the Family. Always talking about me. Can’t you hear them?’ said Mrs. Jennings. ‘Talking about me?’

‘Who was she telephoning?’ said the old woman.

> ‘Police most likely. She knew we’d tell anyway.’

> ‘It began with her putting on all that weight,’ said the daughter.

‘It began with me putting on weight,’ said Mrs. Jennings. ‘That’s what they’re saying. Can’t you hear them? “She knew we’d tell anyway,” they’re saying. Always watching me, always talking about me. But for them, I could have pretended this was an accident, I might have got away with it; but they wouldn’t have that. Better ring the police, they said. It was the daughter’s husband rang you, I heard him, we’ve just seen a murder committed he said, I heard him. I hear them all the time. They watch me and talk about me. Can’t *you* hear them? Listen!’

‘They’ve stopped now,’ said the policeman.

‘No, they haven’t, they’re chattering on, chattering on....’ A policewoman had arrived and now put an arm lightly about her shoulders. ‘Where is she taking me?’

‘Where you won’t hear them talking. You don’t have to worry, love; you won’t have them watching any more.’

‘They’ll watch you taking me.’

‘No, no, they’ve all gone inside, there’s no one now on the balcony.’

‘You can’t hear them talking? They’ll still be talking.’

‘Well, now you mention it, I think I can,’ he said. ‘But nicely. Sorry to see you go, they’re saying. Such a nice lady, really, they never meant anything against you; be sorry to see you go....’ Tenderly clucking, he urged her gently towards the door, the woman’s arm still about her shoulders. But when she was gone, he said to his sergeant, ‘No Family?’

‘Single-room bed-sitts., sir,’ said the sergeant. ‘One elderly lady on that floor, lives alone. Neighbour calls in, wheels her out on to the balcony with a thermos flask and some sandwiches, for the day.’

‘No one else calls?’

‘No one, sir. No friends, nobody. Sad for her, poor old girl,’ said the sergeant. ‘She’s blind.’

PART FIVE

Black Coffee

Bless This House

THEY WERE BEAUTIFUL; AND even in that first moment, the old woman was to think later, she should have known: should have recognised them for what they were. Standing there so still and quiet in face of her own strident aggression, the boy in the skin-tight, worn blue jeans, with his mac held over his head against the fine drizzle of the evening rain—held over his head like a mantle; the girl with her long hair falling straight as a veil down to the pear-shaped bulge of her pregnancy. But though suspicion died in her, she would not be done out of her grievance. ‘What you doing here? You got no right here, parking outside my window.’

They did not reply that after all the street did not belong to her. The girl said only, apologetically: ‘We got nowhere else to sleep.’

‘Nowhere to sleep?’ She glanced at the ringless hand holding together the edges of the skimpy coat. ‘Can’t you go home?’

‘Our homes aren’t in London,’ said the boy.

‘You slept somewhere last night.’

‘We had to leave. The landlady—Mrs. Mace—she went away and her nephew was coming home and wanted the place. We’ve been hunting and hunting for days. No one else will take us in.’

‘Because of the baby,’ said the girl. ‘In case it comes, you see.’

Suspicion gleamed again. ‘Well, don’t look at me. *I* got nothing, only my one bed-sit here in the basement—the other rooms are used for storage, all locked up and bolted. And upstairs—well, that’s full.’

‘Oh, of course,’ said the girl. ‘We didn’t mean that at all. We were sleeping in the car.’

‘In the car?’ She stood at the top of the area steps peering at them in the light of the street lamp, shawled, also, against the rain. She said to the boy: ‘You can’t let her sleep in that thing. Not like she is.’

‘Well, I know,’ he said. ‘But what else? That’s why we came to this quiet part.’

‘We’ll move along of course,’ said the girl, ‘if you mind our being here.’

‘It’s a public street,’ she said illogically. But it was pitiful, poor young thing; and there was about them this—this something: so beautiful, so still and quiet, expressionless, almost colourless, like figures in some dim old church, candle-lit at—yes, at Christmas time. Like figures in a Christmas crêche. She said uncertainly: ‘If a few bob would help—’

But they disclaimed at once. ‘No, no, we’ve got money; well, enough, anyway. And he can get work in the morning, it’s nothing like that. It’s only... Well,’ said the girl, spreading slow, explanatory hands, ‘it’s like we told you. The baby’s coming and no one will take us in. They just say, sorry—no room.’

Was it then that she had known?—when she heard herself saying, almost without her own volition: ‘Out in the back garden—there’s a sort of shed...’

It was the strain, perhaps, the uncertainty, the long day’s search for accommodation, the fading hope; but the baby came that night. No time for doctor or midwife; but Mrs. Vaughan was experienced in such matters, delivered the child safely, dealt with the young mother—unexpectedly resilient despite her fragile look, calm, uncomplaining, apparently impervious to the pain—settled her comfortably at last on the old mattress in the shed, covered over with clean bedclothes. ‘When you’re fit to be moved—we’ll see.’ And to the boy she said sharply: ‘What you got there?’

He had employed the waiting time in knocking together a sort of cradle out of a wooden box; padded it round and fitted it with a couple of down-filled cushions from their car. Taken nothing of hers; all the things were their own. 'Look, Marilyn—for the baby.'

'Oh, Jo,' she said, 'you always were a bit of a carpenter! You always were good with your hands.'

Joseph. And Marilyn. And Joseph a bit of a carpenter, clever with his hands. And a boy child born in an out-house because there was no room elsewhere for his coming... She got down slowly on to her thick, arthritic knees beside the mattress and, with something like awe in her heart, gathered the baby from his mother's arms. 'I'll lay him in the box. It'll do for him lovely.' And under her breath: 'He won't be the first,' she said.

The boy left money with her next day for necessities and went out and duly returned that evening with news of a job on a building site; and carrying in one scarred hand a small, drooping bunch of flowers which he carefully divided between them, half for Marilyn, half for Mrs. Vaughan —'till I can get you something better'—and one violet left over to place in the baby's tiny mottled fist. 'And till I can get *you* something better,' he said.

They gave him no name... Other young couples, she thought, would have spent the idle hours trying to think up 'something different' or christened him after a pop-star, some loose-mouthed, longhaired little good-for-nothing shrieking out nonsense, thin legs kept jerking by drugs in an obscene capering. But no—it was 'the baby', 'the little one'. Perhaps, she thought, they dared not name him: dared not acknowledge, even to themselves...

For the huge question in her mind was: how much do they know?

For that matter—how much did she herself know? And what?—what in fact did she know? The Holy Child had been born already, had been born long ago. Vague thoughts of a Second Coming wandered through her brain, but was that not to be a major, a clearly recognisable event, something terrible, presaging the end of all things? The End. And the other had been the Beginning. Perhaps, she thought, there could be a Beginning-Again? Perhaps with everything having gone wrong with the world, there was going to be a second chance...?

It was a long time since she had been to church. In the old days, yes; brought up the two girls to be good Catholics, washed and spruced-up for Mass every Sunday, convents, catechism, the lot. And much good it had done her!—married a couple of heathen G.I.s in the war and gone off to America for good—for good or ill, she did not know and could no longer care; for years had heard not a word from either of them. But now... She put on her crumpled old hat and, arthritically stumping, went off to St. Stephen's.

It was like being a schoolgirl again, all one's childhood closing in about one; to be kneeling there in the stuffy, curtained darkness, to see the outlined profile crowned by the black hump of the biretta with its pom-pom atop, leaning against the little iron-work grill that was all that separated them. 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost... Yes, my child?'

In the name of the Father; and of the Son... She blurted out: 'Father—I have the baby Jesus at my place.'

He talked to her quietly and kindly, while waiting penitents shifted restlessly outside and thought, among their Firm Purposes of Amendment that the old girl must be having a right old load of sins to cough up. About chance, he spoke, and about coincidence, about having the Holy Child in

one's heart and not trying to—well, rationalise things... She thanked him, made of old habit the sign of the cross, and left. 'Them others—*they* didn't recognise Him either,' she said to herself.

And she came to her room and saw the quiet face bent over the sleeping baby lying in its wooden cradle; and surely—surely—there was a light about its head?

On pay day, Jo brought in flowers again. But the vase got knocked over almost at once and the flowers and water spilt—there was no room for even the smallest extras in the close little room, now that Marilyn was up and sitting in the armchair with the wooden box beside her and the increasing paraphernalia of babyhood taking up so much of the scanty space. The car was being used as a sort of storage dump for anything not in daily use. 'During the week-end,' said Jo, 'I'll find us a place.'

'A place?' she said, as though the idea came freshly to her. But she had dreaded it. 'Marilyn can't be moved yet.'

'By the end of the week?' he said.

'You've been so good,' said Marilyn. 'We can't go on taking up your room. We'll have to get somewhere.'

But it wasn't so easy. He spent all his evenings, after that, tramping round, searching; but as soon as he mentioned the baby, hearts and doors closed against him. She protested: 'But I don't want you to go. I got none of my own now, I like having you here.' And she knelt, as she so often did, by the improvised wooden-box cradle and said, worshipping: 'And I couldn't lose—Him.' And she went out and bought a second-hand bed and fixed that up in the shed, brought Marilyn in to her own bed, was happy to sleep on a mattress on the floor, the box-cradle close to her so that if the child stirred in the night, it was she who could hush it and croon to it and soothe it to sleep again. Is He all-knowing? she would wonder to herself, does He

understand, even though He's so small, does the Godhead in Him understand that it's I who hold Him? Will I one day sit at the right hand of the Father because on this earth I nursed his only begotten Son...? (Well, His—second begotten Son...? It was all so difficult. And she dared not ask.)

She had no close friends these days, but at last, one night, a little in her cups, she whispered it to Nellie down at the Dog. 'You'll never guess who I got at my place!'

Nellie knocked back her fifth brown ale and volunteered a bawdy suggestion. 'A boy and a girl,' said Mrs. Vaughan, ignoring it. 'And a Baby.' And she thought of Him lying there in His wooden bed. 'His little head,' she said. 'Behind His little head, you can see, like—a light. Shining in the darkness—a kind of a ring of light.'

'You'll see a ring of light round *me*,' said Nellie, robustly, 'if you put back another of them barley wines.' And to the landlord she confided, when Mrs. Vaughan, a little bit tottery, had gone off home, 'I believe she's going off her rocker, honestly I do.'

'She looked all right to me,' said the landlord, who did not care for his regulars going off their rockers.

'They're after her stocking,' said Nellie to the pub at large. 'You'll see. Them and their Baby Jesus. They're after what she's got.'

And she set a little trap. 'Hey, Billy, you work on the same site as this Jo of hers. Give him a knock some day about the old girl's money. Got it in a stocking, saving it up for her funeral. Worried, she is, about being put in the common grave. Well, who isn't? But she, she's proper scared of it.'

So Billy strolled up to Jo on the site, next break-time. 'I hear you're holed up with old Mother Vaughan, down near the Dog. After her stocking then, are you?' And he pretended knowledge of its place of concealment.

‘Fill it up with something; she’ll never twig till after you’ve gone. Split me a third to two-thirds if I tell you where it’s hid?’

And he looked up for the first time into Jo’s face and saw the look that Jo gave him: a look almost—terrible. ‘He come straight home,’ Mrs. Vaughan told Nellie in the pub that night, ‘and—“They’re saying you got money, Mrs. V.,” he says. “If you have, you should stash it away somewhere,” he says, “and let everyone know you’ve done it. Living here on your tod, it isn’t safe for you, people thinking you’re worth robbing.” ’ And he had explained to her how to pay it into the post office so that no one but herself could ever touch it. Only a few quid it was, scrimped and saved for her funeral. ‘I couldn’t a-bear to go into the common grave, not with all them strangers...’

‘Never mind the common grave, it’ll be the common bin for *you*, if you don’t watch out,’ said Nellie. ‘You and your Mary and Joseph—they come in a car, didn’t they, not on a donkey?’

‘You haven’t got eyes to see. You don’t live with them.’

‘They’ve lived other places before you. Did them other landladies have eyes to see?’

What was the name—Mrs. Mace? Had Mrs. Mace had eyes to see, had she recognised, even before the baby came—? ‘Course not,’ said Nellie, crossly. ‘She chucked ’em out, didn’t she?’

‘No, she never. She was moving out herself to the country, her son or someone needed the flat.’ But if one could have seen Mrs. Mace, consulted with her... ‘Don’t you ever visit your last landlady?’ she asked them casually. ‘Does she live too far?’

‘No, not far; but with the baby and all... All the same, Marilyn,’ said Jo, ‘we ought to go some day soon, just to see she’s all right. Take you

along,' he suggested to Mrs. Vaughan. 'You'd enjoy the drive and it's a lovely place, all flowers and trees and a little stream.'

'Oh, I wouldn't half like that. I dare say,' said Mrs. Vaughan, craftily, 'she thought a lot of you, that Mrs. Mace?'

'She was very kind to us,' said Marilyn. 'Very kind.'

'And the baby? She wasn't, like—shocked?'

'Shocked? She was thrilled,' said Jo. And he used an odd expression: 'Quietly thrilled.'

So she had known. Mrs. Mace had known. The desire grew strong within Mrs. Vaughan's anxious breast to see Mrs. Mace, to discuss, to question, to talk it all over. With familiarity, with the lessening of the first impact of her own incredulous wonder, it became more difficult to understand that others should not share her faith. 'I tell you, I see the light shining behind His head!' She confided it to strangers on buses, to casual acquaintances on their way to the little local shops. They pretended interest and hastily detached themselves. 'Poor thing—another of them loonies,' they said with the mirthless sniggers of those who find themselves outside normal experience, beyond their depths. She was becoming notorious, a figure of fun.

The news reached the ears of the landlord, a local man. He came round to the house and afterwards spoke to the boy. 'I've told her—you can't all go on living in that one little room, it's not decent.'

'There's the shed,' said Jo. 'I sleep out in the shed.'

'You won't like that for long,' said the man with a leer.

Billy had seen that look, on the building site. But the boy only said quietly: 'You couldn't let us have another room? She says they're only used for storage.'

‘They’re let—storage or not, no business of mine. For that matter,’ said the man, growing cunning, ‘it’s no business of mine how you live or what you do. Only... Well, three and a kid for the price of one—’

‘I’ll pay extra if that’s it,’ said Jo. ‘I could manage that. It’s only that I can’t find anywhere else, not at the price I could afford.’

‘Just between the two of us, then. Though how you put up with it,’ he said, as the boy sorted through his pocketbook, ‘I don’t know. The old girl’s round the bend. What’s this about your kid got a light around its head?—and your girl’s a—’ But the look came once more. A strange look almost—frightening. ‘Well, like that other lot, Jesus and all. She’s mad.’

‘She has some ideas,’ said the boy. ‘That doesn’t make her mad.’

But not everyone agreed with him. The greengrocer’s wife tackled Marilyn one day when she went out for the shopping, Mrs. Vaughan left worshipping the baby at home. ‘They’re all saying she’s going off her rocker. You shouldn’t be there, what with the baby and all. It could be dangerous.’

So still and beautiful, the quiet face framed in its veil of long, straight hair. ‘Mrs. Vaughan—dangerous? She’s kind. She’d do us no harm, she loves us.’

‘She told us last time that the baby lies with its arms stretched out like a—well, like a cross. She said it knows how it’s going to die. Well, I mean! It’s blasphemous.’

‘He does lie with his arms stretched out.’

‘Any baby does, sometimes. And she says he shines. She says there’s always a light around his head.’

‘I put the lamp on the floor once to keep the brightness out of his eyes. It did sort of gleam through a crack in the wood. We explained it to her.’

‘Well, she never listened then. And I say it’s not right. Everyone’s talking. They say...’ It took a little courage to insist, in face of that quiet calm. ‘They’re saying you ought to fetch a doctor to her.’

Mrs. Vaughan rebelled, predictably, against any suggestion of seeing a doctor. ‘What for? I’m not ill. Never better.’ But it alarmed her. ‘You don’t think there’s something wrong with me?’

‘We just thought you looked a bit pale, that’s all.’

‘I’m not pale, I’m fine, never been better in my life. Even them arthritics nearly gone, hardly any pain these days at all.’ And she knew why. Alone with Him, she had taken the little hand and with it touched her swollen knees, had moved it, soft and firm, across her own gnarled fingers. ‘Look at ’em!’ she had insisted to Nellie next evening, in the pub. ‘Half the size! All them swollen joints gone down.’

‘They look the same to me,’ said Nellie and suddenly saw Mrs. Hoskins through in the Private and had to hurry off and join her. ‘Barmy!’ she said to Mrs. Hoskins. ‘I don’t feel safe with her. How do I know she won’t suddenly do her nut and start bashing me? It should be put a stop to.’

Only one thing seemed to threaten Mrs. Vaughan with any suggestion of doing her nut and that was mention of her precious little family going away. If Jo searched for rooms now, he kept very quiet about it. To outside representations that she ought to let them go, that young people should be together in a place of their own, she replied that it wasn’t ‘like that’ between them; that Marilyn was ‘different’. All the same, they were young and shouldn’t always be cooped up with an old woman, and she fought to be allowed to move out to the shed and let them have her room; there was the bed out there now and in this weather it was warm and dry—she’d like it. In other days, she would have gone off to the pub in the evenings and left them free, but the Dog wasn’t what it had been, people didn’t seem so friendly,

they looked at her funny and sometimes, she suspected, made mock behind her back of her claim to be housing God. Not that that worried her too much. In them old days—no one had believed in Him then, either. And I'll prove it to them, she thought, and she would watch the children playing in the street and when she saw a tumble, bring in the poor victim with its bruises and scratches and cajole it into letting the baby touch the sore places with its little hand. 'Now you feel better, love, don't you?' she would anxiously say. 'Now it's stopped bleeding, hasn't it?—when the Baby touched you, it was all better in a minute? Now you tell me—wasn't it?' 'Yes,' the children would declare, wriggling in her grasp, intent only upon getting away. 'It's dangerous,' said their mothers, gathering outside the shops in anxious gossip. 'You don't know what she might do, luring them inside like that,' and a deputation at last sought out Jo. 'You ought to clear out, you two, and leave her alone. You're driving her up the wall with these ideas.'

That's just what we can't do now,' said Jo. 'She gets upset if we even mention it.'

'It could be the last straw,' admitted Mrs. Hoskins, who knew all about it from Nellie at the Dog. 'Properly finish her off.'

'And then she'd be there without us to look after her.'

'You can't spend your whole lives in that one room.'

'If we could get a place and take her with us... But we can't find anywhere, not that we could possibly afford; let alone where she could come too.'

'What?—you two kids, saddle yourselves for ever with a mad old woman? You couldn't do that.'

'She saddled herself with us,' said Jo. 'Where'd we be now, but for her?'

All the same, clearly something must be done. With every day of her life with them, Mrs. Vaughan's obsession increased. She could not bear the baby out of her sight, would walk with Marilyn when she carried it out for a breath of air and almost threateningly warn off the curious who tried for a glimpse of the now quite famous child. If they came to worship, well and good. If not... 'If you don't make some arrangements about her,' said the greengrocer's wife at last, to Jo, 'I will. She's terrorising the whole neighbourhood.'

'She wouldn't hurt a fly. She believes our baby's—something special. What harm does that do anyone else?'

'You never know,' said the greengrocer, supporting the missis, though in fact he was fond of Mrs. Vaughan—as indeed everyone had been in easier days. 'They do turn queer, sometimes. Why not just take her to the doctor and ask him, or take her to the hospital?'

'She won't *go* to any hospital, she won't *go* to any doctor.'

'They can be forced,' said the wife. 'Strait jackets and that. They come and fetch them in a padded van.' But anyway, she repeated, if something were not done and soon, she herself would ring up the police and let them deal with it. 'She's keeping custom from the shop. It can't go on.'

He promised hastily and later convened a little meeting of the malcontents. 'Well, I've done what you said. I went to the hospital and they sent me to some special doctor and I told him all about it. They're going to send her to a place where she won't be too suspicious and they'll have her under observation there, that's what they call it, and then there'll be psychiatrists and that, and she can have treatment. He says it's probably only a temporary thing, she can be cured all right.'

'Well, there you are! You and Marilyn can be finding somewhere else in the meantime and when she gets back and you're not there, she'll just

settle down again.'

'We'll go anyway even if we don't find anywhere. We couldn't let it start all over again.'

'These things aren't as quick as all that. You'll have time to look around.'

'It's not very nice,' he said, 'us there in her room and her in the bin.'

'If you ever get her there. How'll you persuade her to go?'

'I've thought of that,' he said. 'Our last landlady—'

'Oh, yes, that Mrs. Mace she's always talking about. Mrs. Mace would understand, she keeps saying, Mrs. Mace knew all about it... You tell her she's going to see Mrs. Mace.'

'That's what I thought. Mrs. Mace is out in the country now and so's this place, fifteen, twenty miles. I can drive her there in the car. She'll go if she thinks Mrs. Mace is there. I think it'll work.'

And it worked. Mrs. Vaughan was prepared to leave even the precious Baby for a while, if she could go and talk to Mrs. Mace. So many puzzling things that Mrs. Mace might be able to help her with. That about the Second Coming, for example, and then no Kings had arrived, not even a shepherd carrying a woolly lamb; and what about Herod killing off all them boy babies? Of course these were modern days, what would they have done with a live lamb, anyway?—and people didn't go around killing babies any more. But you'd think there'd be something to take the place of these events, something—well, sybollick or whatever the word was and it might be important to recognise them. Mrs. Mace would understand, would at least be sympathetic and talk it all over; she had known them since before the baby even started, had been brushed by the very wings of Gabriel, bringing the message: Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee... She could hardly wait to gather up her few shabby clothes and pack them into

the cardboard box that must do for a suitcase. ‘You’ll look after things, Marilyn, love, just the couple of days? I’d like to have some good long talks with Mrs. Mace. You do think she’ll let me stay?’

‘It’s a big place; like, sort of, a hotel,’ said Jo. ‘But lovely, all them trees and flowers. And lots of nice people,’ he added, cautiously.

‘I thought it was a cottage? It’s only Mrs. Mace I want to see. I *can* be with her?’

‘Oh, yes, of course. We’ve written and told her,’ fibbed Jo, ‘how good you’ve been to us.’

‘Me—good!’ she said. ‘When you think what you’ve done for *me*. Me being chosen! But still, there!—the last time it was only a pub-keeper, wasn’t it?’ The thought struck her that perhaps in fact it had been Meant that they should park outside the Dog that night, only a few doors down; that only through an error had they come to her. ‘Well, never mind, even if I wasn’t worthy to be chosen, fact remains it was me that got you; *and* reckernised you. First minute I saw you! I’ll never forget it.’ So beautiful, so quiet and undemanding, standing out there in the drizzle of the evening rain, Mary and Joseph and the promise of the Holy Child. And as they had been then, so they had remained: quiet, considerate, gentle; reserved, unemotional as she was emotional and out-giving; almost colourless, almost impersonal—a little apart from other human beings, from ordinary people like herself; and yet living with herself, close together in that little place with her for their only friend—the Mother and the Guardian of the Son of God; and the Word made flesh. She knelt and kissed the tiny hand. ‘I’ll come back to You, my little Lord. I’ll always love You and serve You, You know that. It’s only just that I want to know everything about You, I want to get things right, I want to ask Mrs. Mace.’ And all unaware of eyes

watching from behind window curtains, balefully or pityingly or only with relief, she climbed into the battered little old car with Jo and drove away.

Marilyn was nursing the baby when he got home. 'You've got the place all cleared up,' he said, astonished at the change in it. 'You must have been slaving.'

'It kept my mind off things,' she said. But still she did not ask what must be uppermost in her mind. 'Without Mrs. Vaughan here, I must say there's more room. Not as much as we had at Mrs. Mace's—'

'We couldn't stay at Mrs. Mace's once the nephew was coming home.'

'No, I know. I was only saying.' And now she did ask at last: 'Did it go all right?'

'Yes, not a murmur. A bit surprised when we got there, of course, but I kept urging her on, saying she'd be with Mrs. Mace.'

'You found the place again, no trouble?'

'Yes, I found it. A lovely spot, perfect, in the middle of all those woods.'

'And Mrs. Mace?'

'Still there, quite O.K. A bit lonely, I daresay. She'll be glad of company.'

'They should get on fine.' She smiled her own cool, quiet impersonal little smile, shifting the baby on her shoulder so that its fluffy head pressed, warm and sweet, against her cheek. 'Well, she got her wish. You couldn't call that a common grave.'

'No, just her and Mrs. Mace; and right in the middle of them lovely woods like I told her, and all them flowers and the stream and all.' He came across and ran a bent forefinger up the little channel at the back of the baby's tender neck. 'A shame to have to bash her,' he said. 'She was a kind

old thing. But there you are, it's so hard to find anywhere. We had to have the place.'

Such a Nice Man

WHAT A FOOL SHE HAD been to let him! Why must she be always so trusting?—so stupefied by her own too ready social instinct, never giving herself time to think. ‘At thirty-five years of age,’ her husband used to say to her, ‘surely you might have some sense?’ And hadn’t there been warning enough? Suppose this was the man...

But it couldn’t be. Such a *nice* man! Such a nice man, he’d seemed, standing out there on the doorstep, so quiet and solid looking; middle-aged, respectable and behind him in the semi-darkness, the middle-aged, respectable car. On an impulse... Just passing... So many happy holidays in this old house when he’d been a boy... ‘I ought not to trouble you.’ He glanced round him. ‘I hope the gentleman’s in, is he? If not, I won’t bother you, it wouldn’t be right, I’ll go away.’ But he didn’t come to that until he was well into the hall and the front door closed behind him.

‘No, he’s not, actually. But he—he’ll be back any minute...’ Helpless in the toils of her own convent-bred good manners, she led the way into the huge old farmhouse kitchen which to them was the centre of the house; moving away from him, however, backing away to the Welsh dresser against the far wall, leaving him standing uncertainly in the doorway. ‘This room you’ll remember if you were here as a child? And the grandfather clock?’ She felt that she sounded like a house-agent, showing him round.

‘Not too sure about the clock,’ he said—cagily? ‘But I was only a little lad then.’

‘But the dresser?—you remember this old dresser? They say it’s been here since the house was built.’ In fact they had brought it with them, two years ago.

If he knew that it was a test, that no longer disturbed him. He seemed to abandon himself to discovery. 'Oh, well, yes—the dresser I remember,' he said.

So now she knew. Her heart lurched, sick terror seemed to rise in her throat, thick as a vomit, choking her. She faltered: 'My husband can show you the rest of the house—if you want to wait for him. He'll be back any minute; any second. He never leaves me alone here after dark.' And she blurted out: 'There's a man... He rings me up...' She felt his eyes upon her, direct, appraising. 'He says filthy things. Obscene.'

He stood very quiet. He said at last: 'Yes, I thought you'd rumbled me. Well—you're right: it's me. And about your husband—that isn't true, is it? He won't be back till late. I was outside the window, I heard you talking to him oh the 'phone.' He had gone very pale, his broad, solid, pleasant face wore suddenly a grey, dead look. He explained, almost apologetically: 'I've been spying on your house, you see. Waiting for the chance.'

'The chance?' she stammered. 'The chance?'

He stood there with that dreadful grey look, a sort of blank look as though he spoke from another world; motionless, except when now and again his thick white hands gave a sudden little twitch. 'I can't help myself,' he said. 'This ringing up and all. It's disgusting, I know; afterwards I feel ashamed. But I can't help it. It's a sort of sickness, I suppose.' He moved in a little from the doorway, came to the end of the big, scrubbed wooden kitchen table; stood there with it between them. She protested, as though with words she might stem his advance, might fend off for a little while longer the horror to come: 'But why me? Why me? I'm not some young, pretty girl.'

'It's not personal,' he said; almost as though that might bring some reassurance. And he explained it. 'I just look them up in the telephone book.'

Different places, different counties, even; I couldn't do it too near home. My job takes me about a bit and that helps. It's more the house at first, really.'

'The house?'

'Remote houses, hidden away places, like this. I've got to be careful, you see, haven't I?—I wouldn't want to get caught. I find a good house and who lives in it; and then I drive over and ring up from some call box, locally. After that, it depends how they react. Sometimes they're cool, they just say, 'Wou're mad,' and ring off. That kind I don't bother with any more. But if they're upset and disgusted—well, I'm afraid it's better then.' He looked down at his hands, fisted, white and bulging, on the table before him. 'Perhaps I *am* mad. It's dreadful, really. But when it comes on—well, it's like I said, like a drug or something, I can't resist it. And that's why I have to be careful, I mustn't let myself be caught. I couldn't stand prison. What would I do, locked away, if a fit came on me? I really *would* go mad then.'

She grasped at a faint hope. 'The police know about you. We told them about the calls.'

'They can't do a thing,' he said. 'Not unless they was to tap the line day and night. And you're not the only one. I keep several going at a time, just for safety's sake; well, to keep the cops confused, you see.' He was silent for a moment, withdrawn from the present, musing. 'They nearly did get me once, but that was different. That time I killed the poor girl.'

She gave a little jerked out, chopped off scream, bunching her fingers against her mouth. 'Oh, no! Oh, *no!*'

'I didn't mean to,' he said, unhappily. 'I didn't want to. In fact, that part I didn't enjoy at all, I was horrified. Such a pretty young thing, she

was. I'd been ringing her up: like you say, filthy, obscene, I don't know what makes me do it, I feel bad about it afterwards...'

'Couldn't you have treatment or something? Couldn't you get help? Nowadays, they're understanding.'

'Yes, I know, and I wish I could,' he said. 'I honestly do wish it. But—how can I now? It would mean giving myself up; and there's too much against me. I mean, first they'd have me on a murder charge, over that poor girl.' He looked at her, almost imploringly. 'If only they wouldn't struggle, I wouldn't hurt them. I don't mean to hurt them but I'm—strong. And this girl, you see—I went to see her, I pretended I'd lived in the house once, like I did with you. I talked to her, like I'm talking to you; I explained it. But... Well, she wouldn't—and I suppose it's dreadful but it's the struggle I like.' He began to move, sidling towards her round the table, slowly and quietly, thick fingers white-tipped and spatulate, pressed along the wooden edge.

She was sick and cold, the familiar room swam round her as though she saw it through water. She started to gibber, backed up, violently trembling, against the oak dresser. 'Don't touch me! Don't come near me!' But the sad, heavy face came closer; regretful—implacable. She sobbed and stammered: 'Please don't hurt me, *please*—!'

He stopped again; stood there, earnestly, humbly explaining. 'I wouldn't, you see: if you'd only be kind and easy. I'm—just an ordinary man, you must understand that; in other ways perfectly ordinary. Bachelor, yes; but a lovely old mother, looks after me like a king. Good job, solid, respectable, no one ever suspecting a thing. And don't get me wrong, I don't want anything—dirty. Just the usual, just to be—a man.' He fell silent again and into the silence, ash falling in the grate, coal resettling itself, sounded harsh and loud; the grandfather clock struck a single rasping note. 'If they wouldn't struggle,' he insisted, 'they wouldn't get hurt. I sometimes

think it's really only the struggling that—excites me: the hope of the struggling. It's all leading up to that, the 'phone calls, everything, it's liking to get the better of them because no one seems to—want me. If only just once, one of them was kind—was kind and easy and—even a little bit loving—I sometimes think I'd be cured of it, I'd give the whole thing up for ever.'

A desperate hope rose in her of temporising, of reasoning with him. 'Can't you get some nice girl of your own?'

'But that's it,' he said. 'They won't have me. I suppose they—sort of sense this other thing. I suppose I sort of—smell of it.'

'There are—well, prostitutes.' Poor sad girls, living so dangerously, taking such terrible risks. But... 'They would be easy; and I suppose kind?'

'But not loving,' he said. 'And I want some love with it. That's what I go about looking for. If... If, even after all the muck and the filth, the calls and all that—if one of them was just to bring herself to understand, if one of them really understood and forgave, really accepted that I'm—just an ordinary man, only with this sickness...' He thought it over. 'Quite a nice man, really, I suppose, as men go. Honest, dependable, decent—in all other ways, at any rate, decent. And kind, you know, considerate, good to my mother, there never was a better son, I don't suppose.'

'I think you *are* nice,' she said. 'I think you're right. You're just a—a nice, ordinary man; only you're ill, you need help.'

'That's right,' he said. 'I need help. And what help can I look for now, except from a woman? I think if I found that, I could begin life all over again, I really do. But till then...

Till then! She started to move, edging her way along the dresser, her hands spread out behind her, feeling their way along the polished ledge. It brought him sharply out of his absorption. He said: 'That's no use. If you

think you're going to get to the door, get away from me—I'm afraid that's no use. I wouldn't want to kill you, not like that poor girl; or harm you, like some of the others. I mean, I like you, I like you very much, no one else has ever been so kind as you have, listening and understanding. But that won't stop me. You could be an angel out of heaven and it wouldn't stop me. When the fit's on me, I can't help myself. And it's on me now.'

'My husband—' she faltered.

'Your husband won't be home for hours. You know that. He was ringing you from Hampshire.' He said again, in his humble, earnest way: 'I don't want anything—dirty. Just what any man wants.'

She knew now what she must do. It was terrifying, hideous, dangerous—but there was nothing else for it. She had pulled herself together, the room no longer swam about her, her hands grew steady, dropping from the ledge, hanging motionless at her sides, resistance-less. She said, 'I understand. You can't help it; you can't help yourself. And neither can I help myself. Neither of us can.' And she tore herself from the shelter of the dresser and, moving very slowly, went towards him.

He did not stir, just stood there waiting for her. But she saw with a sort of heartbreak that his whole face had become transfigured with an incredulous, inarticulate, grateful joy.

She'd had no idea where to strike. Simply, the sharp kitchen knife thrust itself in and to a vital spot. She found herself weeping, kneeling over him as he lay there, harmless now and pitiful in his harmlessness. So terrible a price to have exacted from him! She and all those other women—if they could but have been 'easy and kind'. Easy and kind—understanding, forgiving, 'even a little bit loving'. But they could not; and she found herself weeping, kneeling there beside him, sobbing it out to the upturned, trustful face. 'I didn't mean to kill you! I had to save myself, I had to save

all those other girls to come. The knife was there on the dresser. But I didn't mean it to kill you...'

After all—except for that one thing, he had seemed such a *nice* man.

The Whispering

SHE LEANED AGAINST THE counter and the empty glass made a tiny chattering against the mahogany with the shaking of her ringless left hand. They were whispering about her over there in the corner. She said so to the barman. 'They're whispering about me over there.'

'Oh, for Pete's sake!' he said. 'You always think people are whispering.'

'Why do they whisper? Why don't they just talk to me straight out?'

'Perhaps they don't wish to talk to you straight out,' he said, 'or any other way. And I'll be frank with you—neither do I.'

Tears welled up into her large blue eyes. She said with maudlin dignity: 'In future I'll go to some other bar.'

'You do that,' he said, 'God knows we're fed up with you in here.'

But she stayed. She always stayed. Where ever else she went, it would be the same. 'It was all such a long time ago,' she said to the man. 'Why should they whisper still?'

But they whispered: and the whispering grew and grew.

Such a long time ago...

Of course Simon should never have taken her there in the first place. But she'd begged and pleaded and he never could resist her. 'You know I'd take you if I could, Daffy. I'd do anything for you, you know I would, I'd die for you...'

And so would they all, all the others, all the boys—they'd lie down and die for Daffy Jones. And not only the young ones. 'My Pa,' Daffy used to say, 'he'd go out and get himself run over if it would do me any good.'

No, honestly he would—he'd die for me.' His Daffodil, he called her, his Golden Daffodil.

Talk about daffy! Simon thought—but there it was, she did remind one of a daffodil, so slender and fresh in the little narrow green frocks she so often wore, with that bell of bright yellow hair.

'All the same, Daffy, I couldn't take you to the Blue Bar. It's just what it says, it's off-colour, it's an awful place. I couldn't.'

But it sounded thrilling and the other girls at school would have fits when they heard she'd been there. 'Oh, Simon, don't be so stuffy! Please.'

'Honestly, I couldn't. What would your father say? He'd have a heart attack.'

'My father has heart attacks the whole time,' she said.

'Well, I don't mean that. I mean he'd do hand-springs.'

'If my father did hand-springs he'd have a heart attack,' she said laughing, 'so it comes to the same thing.'

'I just meant that he wouldn't like it. He'd murder me!'

Daffy was his cousin, her father was his Uncle John.

'It's a dreadful, sordid place, sailors and tarts and people like that, everybody drunk or hashed up, some of them even on the hard stuff.'

He had, in fact, been there only once himself, taken by two much older boys who had left school—his own school. He went to boarding school; not Daffy's. It had shocked and scared him; scared him even more to think it might ever come out that he had been there.

And she recognised that. She was a fly one, little Daffy Jones.

She said: 'But *you* go there,' and added with the smallest slyest of meaningful glances, 'what would *your* Pa say?'

So he took her. Never mind the threat implicit, he loved her, he had always loved her, always, since they'd been small children together: Daffy

so fresh and dewy-eyed, Daffy irresistible.

‘Gosh!’ she said when they got there, ‘isn’t it frightful? Fancy you!’

‘Oh, well,’ he said, casually sophisticate, ‘one grows up.’

But when his neighbour on the close-packed bench against the greasy wall offered him a drag, he said at once: ‘No thanks.’

‘Oh, do!’ said Daffy. ‘I’d love to have a try.’ Not for nothing was she known at school, with double meaning, as the Sex-Pot, but he was not to know that. ‘Only I don’t like sharing,’ she said to the man.

‘Plenty more where that came from,’ said the man, producing a handful of ready-rolled untidy cigarettes. He suggested to Simon, ‘Only it’ll cost you bread, man, bread.’

Of all the phoneys! But poor Simon fell for it all like a ton of bricks and forked out twice as much for the stuff as Daffy could have got it for, any day, from the school gardener.

‘Do let me have a—a drag, do they call it?—Simon. I’d love to try it.’

The stuff takes you different ways. Simon it wafted into a beautiful dream, sitting huddled on the bench gazing before him into a brilliance where beautiful people danced and hugged and did beautiful things, right out there in the open before everyone. He awoke to the sound of her screeching. She was shaking him, screaming at him.

‘Look at me! Look what he did to me.’

She looked beautiful, he thought, standing there with her dress half ripped off her body, showing the lovely white nakedness underneath, her hair all torn and tousled, her eyes so strangely bright—she must have been having a beautiful, beautiful time.

‘You look beautiful, Daffy,’ he said. ‘Did you have a good time?’

‘Good? It was horrible. Look what he did to me!’

‘You shouldn’t have gone with him if you didn’t like it.’

But she had liked it. For most of the time. She had never before been with a real, grown-up man. But then...

‘He wanted it all wrong,’ she said. ‘I thought he was going mad. I didn’t know what he was up to.’ She went into details. ‘So I tried to make him stop because, after all, there are limits; and he went berserk—it was absolutely frightful.’

And indeed when he looked at her again, fighting his way up out of his euphoric self-absorption, she did perhaps look rather a mess.

‘I’d better take you home. We’d better both go home.’ Lovely, blissful home, warm bed, comfortable dreams...

She was hugging together her ripped dress, trying to comb out her torn and tangled hair, scrabbling in her handbag for lipstick and little tubes of shiny eye make-up: spitting into an oblong box of mascara, thickening her lashes with great blobs of it, with some vague idea of getting back to normal, making herself ‘look good’.

‘What’ll I tell them? How’ll I explain to Mummy and Daddy? They’ll go mad.’

‘Tell them what happened,’ he said comfortably. ‘You couldn’t help it. Say he made a pass at you and, of course, you wouldn’t and he beat you up.’

‘They’ll say what was I doing here?’ Out of her anxiety, grew belligerence. ‘You should never have brought me to a place like this.’

He protested: ‘You made me bring you.’

‘You, my own cousin! What will my Pa say?’ Her father was a simple man: simple and gentle. But when he saw her like this, his little pet, his darling, his innocent flower... ‘He’ll murder you,’ she said.

‘You went with the man. I told you not to.’

‘You should have stopped me.’

‘How could I?’ he said, simply. ‘I was stoned.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t have got stoned and let me.’ She sat hunched up beside him on the bench. Now and again, vaguely, curious glances swept over them and swept on. She looked a bit young for the Blue Bar—too young and too—well, different—to have been outside, having it rough with that sailor chap they called The Butcher; for that matter, *both* of them looked much too young, two silly kids out of place, from another world. Still, that was their affair. She, in her turn, looked back at them: dirty, raddled women, too remote from long-past youth and beauty to be of use to anyone but the rough, drunken, drug-soaked degenerates that would come to such a place.

‘Simon, if my father knew! Swear you won’t ever tell him I was here.’

‘What shall we say to them, then?’

‘Say that we—say that we were walking along, say we were coming home from the Singing Café, that’s harmless enough, along the river path. And just by that bench, the bench in front of Mardon’s hotel, say it was there; we must stick to the same story exactly—say there were these three boys and they jumped up and started making passes at me. And you fought them off—I’ll say you were terribly brave—but it was three to one and one of them got me away. Here, pull out your tie, mess up your clothes, look as if you’d been in a fight.’ But he’d have no scratches and bruises, no black eyes, he wouldn’t look a bit as if he’d been in a fight; and what was more, he didn’t look as though he were taking in a word she said. Anyone would see that he was stoned, even her innocent father would recognise that much. He’ll be at the zombie stage, she said to herself, he’ll never stick to anything. She said: ‘No, after all, skip it. I’d better go alone.’

Her light summer coat covered her ripped clothes. She got home at last, going the direct way, not along the river path. It was late, but the later

she got home, the more likely her father would be anxiously waiting to see that she was safe. And, sure enough, at the first scrape of her key in the lock, the landing light went on and he was creeping downstairs so as not to wake her mother, wrapped in his old brown checked dressing-gown, the tassel of his cord following him with tiny muffled bumps from step to step.

‘Daffy? Where’ve you been? You’re awfully late.’

The coat covered her clothes but the pale, bruised face told its own story and the torn, tousled yellow hair. She had been thinking all the way home what best to say. His face, always so thin and worn, now turning to a bad colour she too well knew, gave her her cue. She tumbled into his arms. ‘Oh, Daddy!’

‘What is it, darling, what’s happened? Oh, my God—you haven’t been...? They haven’t...?’ He led her, as she sobbed and shuddered, into the sitting-room, lowered her on to the sofa, fell on his knees before the electric fire to switch it on, as though offering a prayer to it for warmth and comfort for her; came back to sit beside her on the sofa, circling her shoulders with a trembling arm.

‘Don’t cry, sweetheart. You’re safe now, sweetheart. Tell Daddy, darling, it’ll be better when you’ve told.’ But he left her again for a moment, ran to the door, called up the stairs: ‘Hester!’, darted back to the cupboard, found brandy and a glass. ‘Here, darling, try, just a sip. Then you can tell me.’

His hand was shaking as he held the glass, his face was a terrible colour, that ugly blue-grey, rather frighteningly patched with a dusky red. He fumbled almost surreptitiously in the breast pocket of his pyjamas, shook a small pill into his hand and swallowed it.

She sobbed and shivered and at last burst out with it all. ‘Oh, Daddy! It was Simon.’

‘Simon?’ he said; stupefied at the sound of that name.

‘On that bench by the river, Daddy. You know, the bench in front of Mardon’s Hotel—’

‘Mardon’s?’ he said. ‘That’s not on your way home.’

‘No, but he—he wanted to go there. So we went and then we stopped and sat on the bench and we were just looking at the river and talking—at least I was just talking; and then...’ She buried her face against his shoulder. ‘Don’t make me tell!’

‘Oh, my God, Daffy!’ he said; and you could sense reaction to her plea, humble and gentle: it’s her mother she needs, not me. He left her again for a moment and went out into the hall, calling more urgently up from the foot of the stairs. ‘Hester! Wake up, come down! Hester, it’s Daphne: come down.’

And she came, hurry-scurrying, anxious, trembling, her dressing-gown clutched with a shaking hand tight up against her throat as though to shut out some bitter cold wind in that well-warmed house.

‘What is it, my darling, what’s happened? Oh, God, darling!—your face, all those marks—your hands, your hair.’ And she cried out, as the father had cried out, voicing the nameless fear never far from their hearts: ‘You haven’t...? They haven’t...?’

‘It was Simon,’ she said dully.

‘Simon? What Simon? Which Simon? You can’t mean your cousin, Simon, Daffy?’

‘Mummy, I *tried* not to let him.’

The mother could not—would not—take it in. ‘Simon? He’s only a boy, he’s only seventeen.’

‘Boys of seventeen nowadays...’ said her husband.

‘But Simon?—he’s her own cousin, he’s like her brother.’

‘No, Mum,’ said Daphne. ‘He isn’t. He’s never been.’ But how would she, innocent blossom, have recognised that? ‘I mean, he was always sort of —sloppy, sort of lovey-dovey, you know.’ And she searched in her keen little mind for a phrase from her mother’s own courting days. ‘I mean he’s always sort of carried the torch for me.’

‘But, Daffy, what happened?’

What had happened? He hadn’t taken her to that place, no; for any investigation might produce someone who had observed her going off outside, so flirtatious and willing, with the sailor, Butch. But Simon would soon admit that they had been there: would confess to having taken her there—to having given way to her entreaties and taken her there. And to having smoked that wicked pot and so been unable to control her when she had insisted upon leaving him. Simon in his silly innocence would give it all away. Well, then, Simon must be discredited in advance. ‘He was stoned, Daddy. He didn’t know what he was doing. He was stoned out of his mind.’

They picked up these dreadful expressions from the television. ‘You mean he’d been drinking?’

‘He was on hash. On hashish. Of course, I didn’t know. I couldn’t understand him. He kept talking about some awful place, some sort of dance place, you know, where sailors went with women, awful women, and everyone was on hash or something, even on the hard stuff; Simon told me that, he said lots of them were “on the hard stuff”. He said he’d take me there, he wanted to take me there. I believe in the end,’ said Daffy carefully, ‘he almost thought he *had* taken me there, he was in a sort of dream, a sort of nightmare, he thought he was there, he thought I was one of those—those women...’ She broke off, shuddering and whimpering; looking into their white, stricken faces, searching for any sign of doubt. But there was none. Simon could protest and deny but would be obliged to admit that he had

been under the influence of an unfamiliar drug—he was far too stupid and honest not to tell the truth; and might, in the end, even be brought to half believe her story himself. No one in that place was likely to have taken any notice of them; let alone to admit to having stood by and watched her, so young and obviously unaccustomed, being taken out to be raped and beaten up by the man even they called The Butcher.

‘We were going to the folk-singing café—you know, you all sit round and have coffee and listen to the singing. Well, we did go and we were sitting at the back of the cafe, away from the stage, and suddenly the man next to Simon passed him a cigarette and Simon said “Thank you” and smoked it and then he said had the man got any more that he wouldn’t mind selling him, because he’d run out; and the man said, “It’ll cost you bread, man,” but, of course, that can mean only “you’ll have to pay for them”. At least, that’s what I thought; but anyway, he sold Simon a few loose ones and Simon was smoking away and he seemed to go a bit dreamy, not to say zombie, but of course I thought it was only the music. But on the way home, we went and sat on the bench like I told you, Daddy...’

‘She didn’t want to go,’ he said quickly to her mother.

‘It wouldn’t matter, darling, if you did,’ said her mother, gently. ‘I mean, just sitting on a bench in the moonlight, just...’ You could see her thinking that one mustn’t be square and narrow-minded, things had changed these days. ‘Just doing a bit of necking, darling.’

Honestly, thought Daffy, they were so naive it was almost sickening. She said: ‘Oh, yes, I know, Mummy; but actually I was tired. I wanted to come home. And then he—he was so strange and insistent and then he started trying to kiss me and then—then...’

‘Oh, Daphne, he didn’t—?’ Her mother sat staring at her, one hand fisted against her mouth as though to plug in the little moaning, whimpering

sounds that would force their way out. Her father was silent and his silence was worse than the whimpering.

Into that frightening silence, she began to gabble; and with the gabbling, memories came flooding back. ‘Then he... I fought and struggled...’ Real memories, genuinely terrifying, genuinely vile, the shock and horror of that onslaught by a man savage with drink, and frustration of a perverted passion. The earlier passages of her acquiescence were passed over: the rest, with genuine sobbings and bleatings, blurted out in a genuine sickness of frightened and disgusted recollection. The thin summer coat had all this time remained wrapped about her. Now she stood up and let it fall.

That slender white body like a lily, swaying within its ragged enfolding leaf of the little green dress: livid weals scoring the delicate skin, throat, arms, breast, great patches of red which tomorrow would be purple bruises, dried blood where filthy nails had scratched: marks of teeth on a soft round shoulder... The mother gave one horror-stricken glance and fell back, half fainting, into her corner of the sofa. The father said, in a high, harsh, scraping voice: ‘Daffy. You must answer. Did he? Did Simon—’

If any investigation arose, it could be proved all too surely that here was no dear little virgo intacta. She collapsed, sobbing afresh. ‘Oh, Daddy, please! Don’t ask me.’

But he repeated it, sick, dull, with that horrible grey-blue look on his face, though now, thanks to the medicine, the flush had died down. ‘I must ask you, Daffy. Did he...? Dear God!—Daffy, did Simon succeed in—raping you?’

She lifted her head and looked back into his face; the small flower-face looking back into the haggard thin face with that blue-grey, ash-grey skin. She bit on an already bleeding lip and turned away her head.

A simple man: with a serious heart condition, perhaps with but little time left to live. A man with one passion, with one hope, one idea, one total, blinding perfection of happiness in his life—so young, so fresh, untouched by the dirty world about her, so starry innocent—his golden girl, his golden Daffodil... A gentle man who for the rest of his life had retained the symbol of the hideous years of enforced ungentleness: his old Army revolver. He went to it now: went with a sort of automatism, turned back to that symbol of the red rage that had in those bad days consumed him at the sight of friends and comrades lying shattered into hideous stillness at the hands of the enemy; the red rage that then—as now again it must—had borne him on the only wings that would carry him to the duty that must be done: the wings of an unthinking, revengeful fury. Like an automaton, he loaded the gun with a single shot, left the house, walked the short distance to his brother's home: stood in the darkness outside the white painted door and called out, sharp and harsh, hardly knowing that he lifted his voice: 'Simon! Come out here!'

The front door opened. Framed in the light from the hall, still reeling a little, shocked, sickened by the memories which, with a terrifying clarity, were now returning, the boy stood there and looked out into the night. Looked out and saw where the stream of light caught the barrel of the revolver in a black gleam: and cried out: 'It wasn't my fault, Uncle John! She *made* me take her there.'

Like a man deaf and dumb, he lifted the gun, took aim at the boy's left breast and fired; and stood quietly aside through the ensuing uproar till the police came to take him away.

And so the Golden Daffodil—the press had latched on to her pet name in one minute flat—was on all the front pages. Only, Mummy—true to form—had fought off the reporters and photographers and there was always the

same photograph and it was an awful thing—taken quite early on the following morning when she was still drenched in tears about poor Simon being dead and poor Daddy being in prison; no make-up, hair in the most frightful mess because, of course, there'd been no time to go to Freesia's to get it done; face patched with bruises, and still in one's dressing-gown, though fortunately the lovely new one that had been Mummy's last birthday present. And things were quite dicey. Policemen kept coming and asking her questions—or policewomen, rather: it was all so delicately handled that really it almost made Daffy giggle—though of course it was too awful about Daddy and Simon. Mummy made her stay in bed and she lay propped up on pillows and wanly lived again through the recital of Simon's attack and Daddy's reaction to what she had told him about it. That all went all right, went fine, and after all now at least Simon could never contradict her. But after that...

First Maureen and Lindy turned up. Allowed to visit her after anxious telephone calls between the Mums. 'You won't—well, tell them anything about all *that*, darling? They might not understand. Of course they're older than you are, but still...

So it all had to be told in whispers; not about the Blue Bar, of course, best to keep that entirely to oneself—it was quite rivetting enough just pinned on to poor Simon (who ever would have thought that proper little cousin of Daffy's would have had such kinky ideas?). But when she mentioned Mardon's bench, Maureen responded immediately: 'You can't have been on that bench, because *we* were. We were there half the night with the Frazer boys.'

She didn't think of the come-back quick enough. She drew a red herring. 'I didn't know you even knew the Frazer boys.'

‘Good lord, Daffy, Maureen and Roddy Frazer have been having it off for weeks. Haven’t you, Maureen?’

‘He’s terrific,’ said Maureen.

‘Eddie’s not too bad,’ said Lindy. ‘But inexperienced.’ She wouldn’t have bothered with him, she added, but they wanted to make up a foursome.

‘I went with him once and I thought he was absolutely dreary.’

‘Oh, well, we know your standards, Daffy,’ said Lindy laughing:

‘But anyway, why all this drama with your cousin, Simon? Why not just let him?’ And she laughed again and said that heaven knew, kinky or not, Daffy hadn’t exactly had anything to lose by it.

‘He happens to be dead,’ said Daffy stiffly; drawing the subject ever further from the bench by the river.

‘Oh, well, yes we know that, darling; and of course it’s too frightful. And about your father and all that. My God, it’s frightful!’

‘Why on earth did you have to go and tell your father, Daph?’

‘He caught me sneaking in. I was in such a mess, I had to say something. And anyway, I was pretty steamed up. I did have an awful time. I mean, look at these bruises.’

‘I can’t see why you should struggle? Why not just let him get on with it?’

‘Well, good heavens, he was like a sex maniac! He’d been smoking all evening and heaven knows what this pusher at the bar, well I mean in the café, had sold him. He was stoned clean, he just did his nut. Of course I couldn’t tell my parents I’d let him. I had to say he’d forced me.’

‘Good lord—poor Simon!’

‘Yes, but he did knock me about. Of course it’s awful about Daddy shooting him, but still he did knock me about.’

‘All the same, Daphne, it wasn’t on that bench outside Mardon’s,’ said Maureen, coming back to cases. ‘Because we were there ourselves.’

‘I didn’t say the bench outside Mardon’s. I said it *wasn’t* the one outside Mardon’s. The one we went to was the one further down, by the warehouse. You know I always go to the warehouse one, at least I always used to with Tom.’

‘What’s Tom going to say about all this poor-little-raped-virgin stuff, when it comes out?’

‘For that matter, Daffy, what’s everyone going to say? I mean, everyone knows about *you*.’

‘Well, then everyone will just have to shut up, won’t they?’ said Daffy. She gave them that sly little sideways glance of hers, the meaningful glance that had finally blackmailed poor Simon into giving way and taking her to the Blue Bar. ‘Otherwise I might start talking in self-defence. I mean, if they knew how everyone at school was doing it, not to mention the pot and all the rest of it—if they knew the temptations I’d had and the example that had been set me by—by older girls than me: well, I wouldn’t be so much to blame, would I? So everyone had better just shut up, hadn’t they? And I didn’t say I was down by the river near Mardon’s, I said “we were on that bench, not the Mardon’s one but the other bench”. Or would you like to get up in court when they’re trying my father for murder and say that you know I wasn’t at the Mardon’s bench because you were there yourselves all night, having it off with a couple of boys?’

‘My God, that young Daphne, she’s a cool one!’ said Maureen to Linda as they hastily went away. (All the same, she *had* said she’d been outside Mardon’s.)

Daphne herself was not too pleased with the way she had handled it. She should have thought of that threat earlier. Because one day she was

going to have to face Daddy and she'd definitely told Daddy that she'd been by the Mardon's bench; and he'd commented that that wasn't on the way home—he wouldn't forget that, you couldn't just slur it over with *him*. Had Mummy heard? No, she hadn't come downstairs by then. So only Daddy would know. A thought flicked through her mind and flicked out again. If Daddy knew she'd told one lie, would he begin to wonder if, after all, Simon had been innocent?

If Daddy should give her away! If everyone got to know that she'd gone to that place, that she'd been with that sailor, that she'd lied about poor Simon and lied and lied and lied... If all the newspapers, cooing now about poor little innocent-injured Golden Daffodil—if they knew that she was just a sexy trollop who could give lessons to any of the boys at school and *had* given lessons to most of them! If they knew that she'd let Daddy go off and murder Simon—murder him!—was letting Daddy now face the rest of his life in prison, all because of her lies... And Mummy, poor Mummy, having to live on, with all the family knowing that Daddy had killed Simon, her own cousin, his own nephew, his own brother's son—had actually shot and killed him: because of her lies...! If Daddy were ever to give her away!

But he wouldn't. How could he ever harm her, his Golden Daffodil? He'd die to protect her. Daddy would *die* for her.

And it wasn't only Maureen and Lindy. Now a man came forward and told the police that he'd recognised her picture in the paper as that of a girl he'd seen that night at the Blue Bar, a disreputable haunt of sailors in the bad part of town.

The police had informed the solicitor who was looking after Daddy's defence and he came to see her. Could this man's story possibly be true?

‘Of course not,’ said Daffy, opening the large blue eyes. ‘I never even heard of such a place.’

‘You were at the folk-singing café all through the evening?’

‘Yes, till we went home by the river. Of course we were.’

‘Did you see anyone who might confirm that?’

‘What, you mean at the café? No, we didn’t see anyone we knew. We were near the back and they keep the lights very low because of the singing.’

‘One man did speak to you?’

‘Yes, but he was a pusher. *He* wouldn’t come forward, would he?’

No flies on little Miss Jones, reflected the solicitor. He suggested: ‘Your cousin, however, had wanted to take you to some place like this bar? You told your father so.’

‘Oh, yes, but...’ She thought it all out rapidly. It was getting rather scary. ‘Perhaps the man saw Simon there on some other night,’ she suggested, ‘and just mixed up the nights. He used to take other girls there—or anyway to some place.’

‘It was your picture the man recognised.’

‘He couldn’t from the papers, that was the most awful thing. He probably recognised Simon’s and remembered seeing him there on some other night with some other girl and then associated the other girl with me.’ It sounded pretty good, but it wouldn’t deceive Daddy; Daddy would think it too much of a coincidence, after all she’d told him about Simon wanting to take her to just such a place. And the thought flicked in and out again. If Daddy realised that all along Simon had been innocent of any assault on her—would he really stand by her still? Would he let Simon be blamed for the rest of his life—well, for the rest of his death, then: wouldn’t that seem even worse to Daddy?—that Simon was dead and unable to defend himself, that

all Simon's family, Daddy's own family, his brothers and sisters and Granny and everyone—should live on, believing that dead Simon had been so vile, when all the time he'd been innocent? Of course she could admit to having been to the Blue Bar—to having allowed Simon to inveigle her to that awful place and then been ashamed to admit it; it need make no difference to the story of his subsequent attack on the river bank. But then if more people came forward, if people remembered how she'd gone off with the sailor of her own accord—indeed against Simon's rather woozy protestations. Nothing to do but deny it; deny it all.

'Don't tell Daddy about it,' she said. 'It simply isn't true that the man could have seen me there; it would only upset him.'

It upset the solicitor also. He thought to himself: 'If this damn' little bitch has been lying all this time!' But it was necessary to take the story to her father.

The sad, grey man caged up in the prison hospital awaiting his trial said at once: 'Of course it isn't true.'

'The man's very sure. He says he remarked at the time how ill-suited they were to such a place.'

'No, no, he *wanted* to take her—' But that didn't make sense. A thought, a memory, came to his mind, terrifying in its intensity. But he thrust it aside. 'Surely this—mistake of this man's needn't come out in court?'

'I don't think so, no. They were obliged to inform us. But it's no good to the prosecution. You're pleading guilty, so that's all there is to it. And for the defence—'

'I don't want any defence. I've told you. I killed the boy for what he did to my child. I don't want any defence.'

‘It’s just a matter of mitigating circumstances. But anyway,’ said the lawyer, ‘this wouldn’t help us either, so I think we’ll just drop the whole matter.’ Hardly a mitigating circumstance if the boy turned out to have been shot for something he had never done.

The lawyer went away. But the memory came back. That cry, only half heard, all unattended to. ‘It wasn’t my fault, Uncle John. She *made* me take her there.’ Dear God! If Simon had been innocent after all!

Goodness, the photographers outside the court! It was like being a film star. And of course her hair was done now and Freesia, quite thrilled, had made a special job of it and it looked terrific. And the bruises on her face had faded. Pity she couldn’t have used her proper make-up but it would be best, they’d said, to appear very young and fresh and innocent, not to say generally gormless: so that Daddy couldn’t be blamed too much for what he’d done. And, indeed, in the witness box she looked like a flower, the light shining down from the canopy above on the careful halo of golden hair: the golden, Golden Daffodil.

Your name is Daphne Jones? Of such and such an address? And you are sixteen years of age...?

Only sixteen years of age.

Only sixteen; and had been with every boy in the top form at school, with or without drugs for extra kicks.

‘Yes, sixteen last birthday.’

‘Now, don’t upset yourself, Miss Jones—or Daphne, may I call you Daphne? I just wanted to ask you to tell us very simply in your own words what happened that night, the night your cousin died.’

(It wasn’t my fault, Uncle John. She made me take her there.)

Best to cover all tracks. They weren’t going to use it in court, she knew that now. But best to cover all tracks: the man might talk to the paper

afterwards, one never knew.

‘He wanted to take me to a dance place he knew about. He used to go there, he used to take other girls. But it sounded like a horrible place so I wouldn’t go.’

‘You went instead to—?’

‘We went to the Singing Café and then we came home by the path along the river bank—’

‘Would that be your direct way home?’

‘No, he just wanted to come that way. He made me come that way.’ But she saw from beneath her eye-lashes the suddenly tightened grip of the two thin hands clasped on the edge of the dock and she knew that that had been a mistake. Daddy would know better; Simon had never in all his life made her do anything against her will—it had been all the other way.

‘He wasn’t like his usual self,’ she said quietly. ‘He’d been smoking this pot.’

‘And then I think you came to a certain bench—?’

‘Yes,’ she said, quickly again, running it on into the next sentence, ‘and then we sat down and we were looking at the river—’

It made no difference whatever to the case against John Jones, which bench it had been. But something had to be said in the wretched man’s defence and if one could spin it out a little more, Counsel felt, it would look a bit more like earning one’s fee. He humped himself over, leaning on both fistful hands, looking earnestly down at a map laid out before him.

‘That would be the bench outside Dent’s warehouse—here?’

‘Yes,’ she said, slurring it over quickly again, into the following words, ‘and we sat there—’

She saw the quick upwards jerk of the bowed head. He called out sharply from the dock, called out sharply in that high, harsh too-well-

remembered voice he had spoken in that night, just before Simon died. ‘You told me it was Mardon’s bench.’

Shushing from the Clerk of the Court and ushers; a glance of compassionate severity from the Bench. But now she knew that Daddy knew. There was nothing to be done about that—nothing. She must concentrate on convincing the court that she spoke the truth. She explained it all away in her frank little, rather charmingly garrulous way.

‘I keep just saying that it wasn’t the bench by Mardon’s but then people seem to remember that I said the word “Mardon’s” and they think I said it *was*. But it wasn’t. It was the warehouse bench. He took me to the warehouse bench.’

‘Very well. In fact, which bench it was doesn’t really matter. But something happened there which you later told your father? Now—what did you tell him? Tell us, please, just as you told it to him.’

So she told it all again: lived yet again through that horrible half hour with the sailor, Butch—lived through the last half of the time anyway: the less said about the first ten minutes the better, but the rest she lived through as she had lived through it many times already—each time ascribing her injuries, as now, to her cousin. Lived through it: poured it all out, the filth, the bestiality, the brutality, the dress half torn away, the terrible bruising... They listened breathlessly and, as her voice fell silent in the hushed court, she knew that she had won—had won for herself but had won for Daddy also—if only he would accept it. A father—hearing that story poured out through bruised and bleeding lips, seeing the white young face ugly with bruising, the bitten and broken skin, the torn, dishevelled hair—whatever the father had subsequently done, must be condoned to the fullest limit of the law’s discretion. Poor little injured blossom, poor smirched and broken golden Daffodil! Not a man in court but knew—but hoped with all his heart

—that he would have done the same. Not a man in court who did not feel sick to the pit of his stomach at the wrongs that had been done to this lovely child. Not one man.

Or only one.

He had to be helped to the witness box; and now the light shone down, not upon yellow halo and pale, uplifted face but on a bowed head whose face and hair seemed almost of a uniform grey. He fumbled his way through the oath. He said: ‘I have to tell. I have to say...’

From the body of the court where now she sat with her mother, she shot up to her feet.

She cried out, sick, faltering, terrified, hardly knowing what she was doing: ‘Daddy!’ And on a note of pleading, again, ‘Daddy!’

Hushing and shushing. Throughout it he stood there looking back at her terrified face: a long, long, searching look. If that boy had all along been innocent...! He looked into her sick white face and knew that she had lied to him. He had killed—murdered—an innocent child.

Her mother saw the first signal: the terrible purple red flush rising up over the ashy grey; and into the silence she, also, cried out, ‘John! Your pills!’ and besought the stern face a thousand miles away up there on the Bench: ‘He’s going to have a heart attack. He must take his pills.’

He stood there, reeling, his hand going slowly, automatically to his breast pocket, his eyes still fixed on the young, scared, pleading face across the courtroom. An usher proffered the glass of water, all eyes were riveted on the scene where he stood there in the witness box. Across the turned heads she stared back at him. Daddy would never give her away. Daddy would rather die than do harm to his golden Daffodil....

Over the turned white wigs, the averted faces—begging, beseeching, almost imperceptibly she shook her head.

The hand reaching for the life-saving drug, dropped to his side. Daddy would die for her.

And he died. Like a ruined building, slowly toppling, crumbling, with horrible acceleration tumbling at last into a crumpled heap on the floor of the witness box, out of their sight. The heart for so long a traitor to its own harbouring body, looked into the fair face of treachery and broke and bled: and beat no more.

The photographs on the front pages of the evening papers were terrific! Freesia's hair-do was wonderful, just like a halo. It made her look like an angel, honestly it did....

But by the next morning the whispering had begun. And it grew and it grew and it grew...

The Hand of God

THEY COULD SCARCELY BELIEVE their ears. 'He was driving quite *slow*?'

'Well, not fast, Sergeant. I can't say that. And a country road, very little traffic—'

'Constable Evans—Jellinks here, he says himself that he was driving fast.'

'Not all that fast,' said Jellinks quickly.

'He's confused,' said Constable Bill Evans. 'Shocked, I daresay, doesn't know what he's saying.' Natural enough, he added, his big, strong, middle-aged face gone so white and pudgy now in the evening light. Jellinks having just run down—just killed—a girl and her little kid.

'For God's sake, Bill—*your* girl and her little kid. *Your* daughter.'

'That's right,' Evans said woodenly and moved apart, suddenly, and stood with clenched hands, his back turned to them.

Jellinks seized the opportunity. 'You heard what he said. Driving quite slow, he said, and him a copper. And he ought to know!'

'Perhaps it's him that's shocked and confused,' said the sergeant.

'Well, *I* thought you were driving fast,' said a woman, coming forward. A couple of cars had drawn up, and a small group of onlookers stood wretchedly around. 'He passed me ten miles back, going at the rate of knots.'

'I could've slowed down later,' said Jellinks, growing from wary to a little cocky.

'Yes, well... Just come out of the Pig and Whistle, Jellinks, had you?' said the sergeant. 'At closing time.'

‘Yes, I had. I come out of the Pig and Whistle most nights of my life at closing time,’ said Jellinks. ‘But I wasn’t drunk, I never get drunk, they’ll tell you so—and you’ve done all your breathalysing.’

‘And for once it was not a stolen car?’

‘I’ve shown you all the bumph, haven’t I? It’s me own car. All right, so it was stolen originally, getting away from that job on the shoe shop. But I bought it after I’d done my time. Made a pretty good mess of it, but I could patch it up myself. So I went, honest, to the owner and he was glad enough to get rid of it.’

‘And you had the proceeds of the till to pay for it?’

‘I’d done me stint for that,’ said Jellinks, shrugging.

The sergeant stood, waiting. Two constables were nosing about the road—looking at the car, the tracks, making notes, taking names and addresses. He watched them but he knew his men—they were efficient and thorough; he could safely leave it all to them. And Bill Evans was under control again and had turned back to him. ‘We went into that, Sergeant, when Constable Jones turned up—it’s Jellinks’ own car. And he’s right about the breathalyser too. Just under the margin.’

‘I know the score,’ said Jellinks.

‘You’d have to,’ said the sergeant, ‘wouldn’t you?—driving the way you do and for the reasons you do.’ And to Evans, ‘So he took the bend okay?’ Passing cars had obscured the tiremarks in the road, swinging out to avoid the group gathering around the scene of the accident.

‘That’s right, yes.’ The attendants had closed the ambulance door with a slam, and more to distract him than anything else, the sergeant suggested, ‘Just run through it once again for me, before we get to the station. If you can manage it,’ he added compassionately, looking at the sick white face watching the ambulance with its pathetic burden driving away.

‘That’s all right, Skip. Well, like I told you, I was on my bike, just at the end of my beat. I knew I’d meet them, our Jenny and the baby, coming back from the Other Granny’s. The Other Granny, that’s what we call her. Lives just down the road—on her own she is now, since her Tom married our Jenny and moved in with me and the missis.’

‘Yes—so?’ said the sergeant, gently interrupting; he knew all about Bill and Bill’s missis and Tom and Jenny and the baby; and the Other Granny too. The officers were all local men.

‘Yes, well he—the car—was coming up behind them. Came round the bend—not fast, I can’t say he was going too fast. But...’ He made a huge effort. ‘They saw me coming. The little one—she ran forward to meet me, ran into the road, and her mother went after her to catch her.’ He looked at Jellinks steadily. ‘I got to say it,’ he said.

It was beginning to get to Jellinks. He looked ill now in the evening light. But he clutched greedily at salvation. ‘Okay, well, you’ve heard him. I was going slow enough, the kid ran into the road and the girl after her—it wasn’t my fault.’

‘And you stopped at once. You weren’t driving on?’

‘The—well, the jolt like, that stopped me—’

‘Two jolts,’ said Evans with murder in his voice.

‘—and anyway, there he was, biking towards me. I had to stop. Well, I mean I’d’ve stopped anyway, of course I would.’

‘Something like this happened to you once before—and you didn’t.’

‘Nobody was hurt that time. What would I stop for?’ said Jellinks.

‘But this time you had to?’

‘I didn’t have to. I could have... well, there you are, you see!’ he said, improvising triumphantly. ‘I could’ve driven straight on, couldn’t I? Run him down on his bike and driven straight on and no one the wiser. But I

didn't, did I? I had nothing to be afraid of. He says himself, I was driving quite slow, the kid run across in front of me.' But the triumph died and he looked at Bill Evans uneasily. 'You're not going to go back on that in court and say anything different? Don't you try anything of that, mate! I've got friends—'

The sergeant looked from the white face, set and stern, to the narrow white weasel-face, vicious in self-defence. He said slowly, 'Well, that's a good thing, Jellinks—you hang on to them. I think you're going to need them from now on—need all the friends you've got.'

There was a good deal of confusion in the coroner's court, opinions of the minor witnesses varying, as such opinions tend to do. The car was—was not—going fast. They had lain here—lain there—the two pitiful dead bodies. The child's little push-chair had been all smashed up—in the center of the road—on the grass at the verge. The mother had been wheeling the baby—had been leading her, holding her little hand. But Evans stood in the box, four-square, ashen-faced, hands horribly shaking but—positive.

'As honest a witness,' said the coroner, summing it all up, 'as it's been my privilege to listen to in all my experience. The constable saw the whole thing from beginning to end. He tells his story clearly, he says frankly that the driver was not to blame. Other witnesses may be confused by shock but Evans is a trained observer and trained in reporting his observations; and none of you will suppose that he could be biased in favour of the driver who had run down his daughter and her child. There can be only the one verdict—accidental death.'

And outside the court he sought out P.C. Evans and with deep respect shook his hand. 'You set us all an example, Evans,' he said, 'of absolute honesty. You've earned our admiration and our thanks.'

‘I have to do what’s right, sir,’ said Evans, and, expressionless, he moved away.

And the weeks passed and the evenings drew in and dark fell early. Pitch-dark, that night weeks later when the landlord threw Jellinks out of The Pig and Whistle a good hour before closing time. Pitch-dark with only the lights of the pub shining across the blackness of the country road.

The landlord stood in the doorway. ‘And don’t bloody come back! I’m sick of having to chuck you out, you’re-wrecking my custom here.’

But there wasn’t that much doing in a small wayside pub and Jellinks drank spirits these days and rang up quite a packet on the till before it was time to get rid of him.

‘I don’t want to refuse him altogether, Sam,’ the landlord said to one of his regulars who, with a friend, was on the way out. ‘He pays. But what’s got into him these days, I don’t know. Never used to overdo it the way he does now. Most nights he spent in here—’

‘Most nights he spent in the jug,’ said Sam. ‘In and out like a yo-yo. Chuck a brick in a window, grab a handful and make a getaway—’

‘Getaway seems not just the word,’ said the friend, laughing.

‘Still, it’s true. Whenever he was out—well, he was in. In the Pig, I mean. But I never saw him tight, never.’ The two men started together down the steps. ‘My opinion—he’s scared of something.’

‘He’s the chap that ran down some girl and a child?’

‘That’s right. Her father, Evans—resident copper, he is—Evans saw it happen. But he still gave evidence—villain wasn’t going too fast, all the rest of it. He could easy have said he was, but he didn’t. Stood up there in court—I could scarcely believe my ears—’

They could scarcely believe their ears. ‘*Not going fast?*’

‘No, Sergeant, not fast at all.’

A different officer this time, new in the division. ‘But he must have been, to catch the man a wallop like that!’ He threw out a hand toward the dark hump in the center of the road. ‘He’s dead.’

‘His own fault. We both saw it,’ said Sam earnestly, ‘me and Jim here, coming down the steps. Tight as a tick he was. I was saying so to Jim, tight as a tick.’

‘Reeling all over the road,’ said Jim. ‘You couldn’t miss him.’

‘What do you mean?—you couldn’t miss him.’

‘You couldn’t help hitting him,’ said Jim. ‘That’s all. What else?’

‘And that’s your story too, Constable Evans? He reeled out in front of your car?’

You could see the fingers tighten, the slight recoil. But Evans said evenly, ‘That’s right. My story, like you say.’

‘I don’t mean to offend you,’ said the sergeant. ‘I don’t mean that. But... these two gentlemen—they’re friends of yours?’

‘Never set eyes on him in my life,’ said Jim, ‘whatever it is you’re suggesting.’

‘Not a friend of his?’

‘No, I am not. And not a liar either.’

‘All right, well, I’m sorry.’

‘He drove round the bend doing—thirty, forty—not more. The landlord had told the other chap to clear out—’

‘All according to cocker, Sarge,’ said the landlord righteously. ‘I don’t have to serve a customer that’s drunk. And Jellinks is drunk every night, and every night I chucks him out. Right, Sam?’

‘To the great relief of all,’ said Sam.

‘So you didn’t like the man?’

‘Nobody liked the man,’ said Sam. ‘Not unless they was fond of snakes. But that doesn’t mean I’d stand and watch him murdered in front of my eyes, and me and my mate tell lies about it. Evans was driving regular, Jellinks was staggering around, and that was the end of it.’

‘And the end of Jellinks.’

‘That’s right,’ said Constable Evans. ‘And am I sorry for it? No, I’m not.’

‘No,’ said the new sergeant thoughtfully. He suggested, but tentatively—they seemed to be a touchy lot round here—‘You just happened to be driving this way?’

‘Yes,’ said Bill tonelessly. ‘Up to the cemetery.’

‘At nine o’clock at night?’

‘Night or day, it makes no odds to me. I go when I’m off duty.’ And now the tone of his voice did question: any objection?

‘To visit your daughter’s—’ The sergeant broke off. ‘Yes, I know about that. I understand.’

‘Yes, well... That’ll save me explaining then, in so many words, that I drive out to the cemetery to say my prayers by the grave of my girl, lying in her coffin there, with her baby in her arms.’ And he jerked the toe of his solid, black, hobnailed boot toward the figure, laid out now, by the side of the road. ‘Killed by—him.’

‘Of course. Yes, I know. I heard about it. But it was an accident. You yourself gave evidence—the car was not driven too fast, the child ran across his path—’

‘That’s right. Just like tonight. An accident. Car not driven too fast. But—’

‘—the man reeled across your path.’ The sergeant thought it over. ‘A coincidence. Extraordinary coincidence, Constable—you’d have to agree to

that?’

‘Oh, I do,’ said Constable Evans, poker-faced.

‘And yet—’

In the brightness shining across from the pub, lighting up the small group standing there facing one another, tense and still, the men were lifting the stretcher into the ambulance; the hush was absolute as the throbbing of the engine died away into the night. The sergeant could begin herding them all off down to the station now.

And yet—And yet—

‘The accident to your daughter, Evans, and her baby—you were the only witness, isn’t that so?’

‘Me and that—me and the driver, yes.’

‘Yet you gave evidence that certainly saved him from a prison sentence. And now—’

‘And now he’s dead. A second accident,’ said Evans.

‘Coincidence,’ said the sergeant again. He thought it all over quietly. Extraordinary. But coincidences did happen. And what else—? He could ferret around, he could inquire, but how much would that tell him? A man driving on a routine journey. A man reeling drunkenly across his path. Two unbiased witnesses on the spot, seeing it all happen. Collusion?—only collusion could offer any other explanation.

But these were not people to get together to hatch up a plot—to plan, to carry out a thing like this; and one of them was, in fact, a ‘foreigner’—anyone from across the county border was a foreigner here; he could check but he knew he would find it was true—the second witness was a stranger to them all.

Coincidence: it had to be. Fate. The Hand of God.

The sergeant, a religious man, took off his cap, standing there looking down at the pool of blood, dark on the roadway, where a man had died—run down by the man whose child the victim himself had run down a few weeks before.

‘The Hand of God,’ he said. ‘Some of us might call it Fate. I call it the Hand of God.’

The Other Granny—she was a fly old bird. Grannies come in different ages but this Granny had had a long family, with Bill Evans’ son-in-law at the tail end of it: she was *old*. They all met at Evans’ home on the day of the inquest and drank a quiet cup of tea to celebrate his exoneration from blame in the accident to Jellinks. An extraordinary coincidence, the coroner had said, echoing the sergeant’s words on that earlier night; but Fate, that was all you could call it, blind Fate.

And Fate was what they were calling it at home, over their cups of tea. ‘Everyone knows Bill gave his evidence honest and true, when he might have said a wrong word and got that villain what he deserved. Not that you could say anything else, love. We know that. You had to say it.’

‘Yes, I did,’ said Bill.

‘Well, I don’t know that *I* could have done it,’ said young Tom. ‘Not stood there and let him off scot-free, when he’d surely have got a stretch for it. I got to respect you, Dad, honest.’ Unless, he added, with one of the few smiles he had smiled since his pretty young wife and their baby had died, his pa-in-law might have been saving it up—for this?

‘Don’t talk silly!’ said the old lady. ‘How could Bill know that Jellinks would be staggering about the road that hour of night? It wasn’t closing time, was it? And just as he happened to be driving by; all sorts of odd times he goes up to—well, we all know where he was going, poor old Bill, same as all of us goes. And that Jim What’s-his-name coming out with Sam,

the exact right minute to see it happen. Fate it was, the Coringer said so, and he was right. Fate. Retribution, that's the big word for it and just Fate that our Bill was the one to hand it out.' And she got up and stretched her old bones and said if Bill would be a dear now and run her home—

'I'll take you, Mum, in the side-car.'

'No, you won't, Tom, thanks all the same. I'll go with Bill. That side-car of yours—no, thanks! I'm a bit too fly for that.'

And a bit too fly for Police Constable Evans too. Sitting beside him, nice and comfortable in the car. 'Well, it's all over, Bill, my dear. And you'll feel better, now it's done.'

'What's done?' said Bill, his grip tightening on the steering wheel.

'Like I said—retribution. What they're all calling Fate. And let 'em,' said the old lady. 'Then everyone's happy. That's best.'

'Fate and retribution—aren't they the same thing?'

'No, they're not,' she said. 'And you know it. None better. Fate you can't control, can you? Retribution you can.'

'God helps them that helps themselves,' he said.

'He wasn't going slow, was he? Police after him or not, he drove like a demon, always did. Came blinding round that bend, didn't he? And you'd have said so. But when it come out that it was his own car, not stolen, no *need* for him to be driving fast—well, then it was going to be his word against yours, and you her Dad and the baby's Grandad. With a doubt like that in their minds they'd never have dished him out a long sentence, they couldn't. And what was a few months to that one? In and out of prison like a jack-in-the-box, his home away from home. That wasn't going to be any punishment, that wasn't going to be enough. You were going to have to take it into your own hands.'

They had come to her gate; it wasn't very far—Jenny had been walking it that evening, pushing her baby in the pram. 'She never did run into the road, did she?—poor little love. In the push-chair, like some of them gave evidence, only they all contradicted one another. In the push-chair—why would her mum be walking her home, that time of night? He came round the corner, didn't he, driving like a maniac, as always; took the bend too sharp and just—just mowed them down.'

Two tears trickled down her withered old cheeks; she made no attempt to wipe them away, they were welcome there. Her thin fingers, noded like bamboo, rested on Evans' heavy hand gripping tightly now on the steering wheel.

'You're safe with me, Bill. Nobody else will know. But I saw her go off with the baby in the push-chair, didn't I? So I realised. You're not so green as you're cabbage-looking, old Bill, are you?—and you thought quick and acted quick; and all I'm saying is, right or wrong, you're safe with me.'

'I made up my mind,' he said. He had switched off the engine; the car stood, an oasis of warmth and privacy, at the little gate. 'All in a minute I made up my mind and I never changed it again and I haven't changed it now. I had to make him pay, and anyone who couldn't understand that—they didn't see my pretty ones die; they didn't hear them die.'

'He's paid,' she said. 'With his life.'

'And with every hour to the end of his life,' said Bill. 'You should have seen his face when I said he was driving slow. What's he up to, he was thinking to himself, he knows I wasn't driving slow. And then when I said about—about the baby running to meet me, running out into the road! She was in her pram, he knew she'd been in her pram, Jenny was wheeling her in the pram, right on the verge, on the grass. So why was I saying different, why was I saving his neck? He was frightened then. But what was he to

say? I'd got him trapped, hadn't I—he couldn't contradict me. Whatever way he played it, I'd gotten him trapped.'

'That'll be why he took the drink so much?'

'That's right. I couldn't know what way it would take him, I just had to wait and hope that the chance would come. I wouldn't want to get copped for it; for myself, I didn't care—you can understand that, old lady, can't you?—but there was the missis, and your boy, too, I wouldn't want more pain for him. But Jellinks started drinking hard and I knew that was going to be a help—night after night, drinking himself silly to shut out the fear of the threat—he knew some threat was there and there was nothing he could do about it. Short of confessing to perjury, short of admitting to have killed them through reckless driving, what was he to do?'

'He might have done that in the end. Rather have gone to prison.'

'Even Jellinks wouldn't like the sort of sentence that would have got him, him having perjured himself and all. And it wasn't the first accident he'd had and he hadn't stopped for the last one. But like you say, he might do it—I had to go careful. So I watched him. Night after night—the missis thought I was out alone somewhere, brooding. Well, so I was; but I was watching him. Out by the pub, sitting quiet in my car, watching out of the darkness, under the trees. Till I knew exactly, as time went by, how long he'd last before they chucked him out. And then one night, when things were right, I'd cop him. And so I did.'

'All planned?'

'Like I said,' he said. 'And nothing left to chance.'

'It was chance them two being there to witness it, Bill. You couldn't judge what time they'd come out.'

'I didn't have to judge it,' he said. 'I arranged it.'

'Now, come on, Bill!'

‘I’m the copper around here,’ he said, ‘aren’t I? I know what goes on. I know old Sam works night shifts—on duty ten o’clock. I know he calls in at The Pig on his way to work. I know what time he leaves to get to the job.’

‘You couldn’t know he’d have a stranger with him?’

‘I knew all right, don’t you worry. I arranged it.’

‘All right, old clever chops,’ she said with mock resignation. ‘You arranged for old Sam to come out of the pub just at the minute that Jellinks would reel out in front of your car, bringing a stranger with him for—what do they call it?’

‘Unbiased witness.’

‘You arranged it?’

‘This is my manor,’ he said again. ‘I know what goes on. I knew that Sam’s mate, Jamie, was off duty for a week—’

‘You arranged that too, I daresay?’

‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘Poor old Jamie—brought him in at last for poaching.’

‘Bill, you never!’

‘He had it coming to him. Lucky to get away with it for so long.’

‘Till you needed him.’

‘Till I *didn’t* need him on the night shift with Sam. They’d have to bring in a temporary. And like I say, I know. I knew he was being sent in from the other factory, I knew he was coming in by the eight forty, stopping outside The Pig. I knew Jim was meeting him there and having a pint with him before they went off to work. It was just a matter of waiting till the time coincided exactly, then following Jellinks out immediately. And that night it did, as I knew very soon it must. That wasn’t chance, Gran, that wasn’t luck. That was good judgment.’

‘Yes, good judgment.’ But wasn’t that for God, really? Was it for mere man to hand out judgment—to hold trial, to find guilty, to sentence, to execute? She said, following her own line of thought, ‘After all, Bill, this was not murder. He didn’t intend to kill them.’

‘He didn’t care whether he did or not,’ said Bill. ‘That was good enough for me.’

‘Well...’ she said doubtfully. ‘But you’re not God, are you, love? The Hand of God, they’re calling it.’ She mused over it. ‘The Hand of God. Mind you, I’ll say not another word about it, not even to you. But... wouldn’t some people say you should have left it, Bill? Just left it to Him, put your hand into the Hand of God?’

‘And so I did, my old dear,’ he said, leaning across to unwrap the warm rug from about her ancient legs and then lead her into the cottage. ‘So I did. But just to make certain, I gave it a bit of a tug.’

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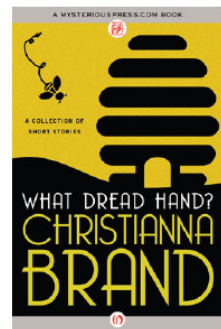
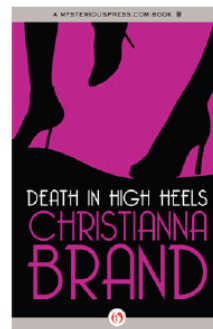
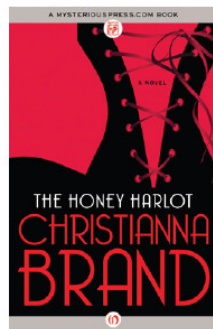
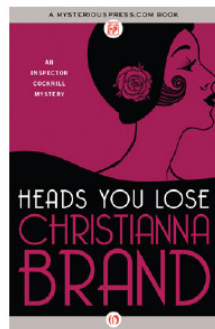
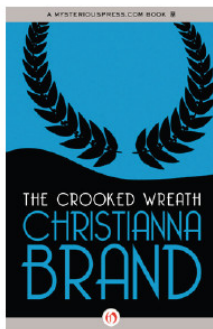
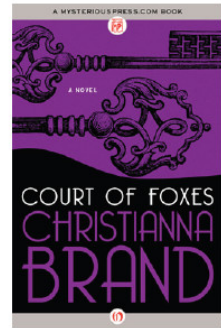
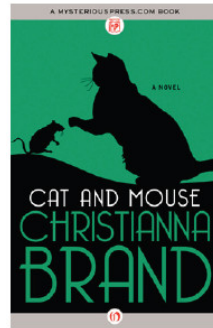
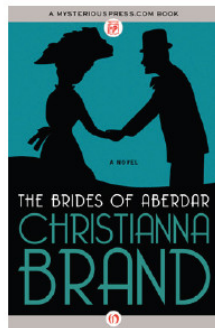
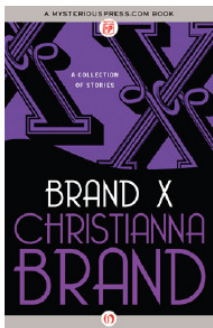
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